

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF
CALIFORNIA
SAN DIEGO

EX LIBRIS.

ERNEST FREDERICK
GYE.

57.

West River

1908



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2007 with funding from
Microsoft Corporation

HORTUS VITAE

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

LIMBO ; and Other Essays

GENIUS LOCI. Notes on Places

PENELOPE BRANDLING

ARIADNE IN MANTUA

A Romance in Five Acts

HORTUS VITAE

ESSAYS ON THE GARDENING
OF LIFE



BY

VERNON LEE



JOHN LANE: THE BODLEY HEAD
LONDON & NEW YORK. MDCCCCIV

SECOND EDITION.

WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED, LONDON AND BECCLES.

DEDICATION



To MADAME TH: BLANC-BENTZON

MAIANO, NEAR FLORENCE,
June 20, 1903.

MY DEAR MADAME BLANC,

The first copy of this little book was, of course, to have been for Gabrielle Delzant. I am fulfilling her wish, I think, in giving it, instead, to you, who were her oldest friend ; as I, alas ! had time to be only her latest.

She had read nearly all these essays ; and, during those weeks of her illness which I spent last autumn in Gascony, she had made me rewrite several among them. She wanted to learn to read English aloud, and it amused her and delighted me that she should do so on my writings. Her French pronunciation gave an odd grace to the sentences ; the little hesitation spaced and accentuated their meaning ; and I liked what I had written when she read it. The afternoons at Paraës which we spent

Dedication

together in this way ! Prints of *Mère Angélique* and *Ces Messieurs de Port Royal* watching over us in her spacious bedroom, brown and yet light like the library it had become ; and among those Jansenist worthies, the Turin Pallas Athena, with a sprig of green box as an offering from our friend. Yes ; what I had written seemed good when read by her. And then there were the words which had to be looked out in the dictionary, bringing discussions on all manner of subjects, and wonderful romantic stories, like the "Golden Legend," about grandparents and servants and neighbours, giving me time to rearrange the cushions and to settle the fur over her feet. And the other words, hard to pronounce (she must always invert, from sheer anxiety, the English *th*'s and *s*'s) ; I had to say them first, and once more, and yet again. And we laughed, and I kissed her beloved patient face and her dear young white hair. I don't think it ever occurred to tell her my intention of putting her name on this volume—it went without saying. And besides, had not everything I could do or be of good belonged to her during the eighteen months we had been friends ?

Dedication

There was another reason, however, why this book more particularly should have been hers ; and having been hers, dear Madame Blanc, yours. Do you remember telling me how, years ago, and in a terrible moment of your experience, she had surprised you, herself still so young, by a remark which had sunk deep into your mind and had very greatly helped you ? "We must," you told me she had said, "be prepared to begin life many times afresh." Now that is the thought, though never clearly expressed, which runs through these essays. And the essential goodness and fruitfulness of life, its worthiness to be lived over and over again, had come home to me more and more with the knowledge and the love of her who had made my own life so far happier and more significant. So that my endeavour to enumerate some of the unnoticed gifts and deepest consolations of life has come to be connected in my mind with this creature who consoled so many and gave herself, with such absolute gift of loving-kindness or gratitude, to all people and all things that deserved it.

That life is worthy to be lived well, with fortitude, tenderness, and a certain reserved

Dedication

pride and humility, was indeed the essential, unspoken tenet of Gabrielle Delzant's religion, into which there entered, not merely the teachings of Stoics and Jansenists, but the traditional gaiety and gallant bearing of the little southern French nobles from whom she was descended. Her Huguenot blood, of which, with the dear self-contradictoriness of all true saints, she was inordinately proud ; her Catholic doctrine, which by natural affinity was that of Port Royal and Pascal ; this double strain of asceticism of both her faiths (for, like all deep believers, she had more than one) merely gave a solemn base, a zest, to her fine intuition of nature and joy. The refusal to possess (even her best-beloved books never bore her own name, and her beautiful bevelled wardrobes were found empty through sheer giving), the disdain for every form of property, only intensified her delight in all the beautiful things which could be shared with others. No one ever possessed, in the true sense of passionate enjoyment, as Gabrielle Delzant possessed, for instance, the fine passages of Corneille, or Maurice de Guérin, or Victor Hugo, which she asked her husband to read to us of an evening ; as she possessed the

Dedication

refined lie of the land, the delicate autumn colouring of her modest and gracious southern country ; and those old-fashioned Paris streets, through which we eagerly wandered, seeking obscure little churches and remote convents where Pascal had lived or André Chénier lay buried. Nay, no one, methinks, ever tasted so much of romance as this lady in her studious invalid's existence ; for did she not extract wonderful and humorous adventures, not only out of the lives of her friends, but her own quiet comings and goings ? Do you remember, dear Madame Blanc, that rainy day that she and I returned to you, brimful of marvellous adventures, when we had found a feather and shell shop built up against an old church in the Marais ; or was it after wandering in the dripping Jardin des Plantes, peering at the white skeletons of animals of the already closed museum, and returning home in floods by many and devious trams and 'buses ? Ah, no one could enjoy things, and make others enjoy them by sheer childlike lovingness, as she did !

For her austerity, like that of the nobler pagans (and there are no nobler pagans, or

Dedication

more reverent to paganism, than true Christian saints, believe me) pruned all natural possibilities into fruitfulness of joy. And her reckless giving away of interest and of loving-kindness, enabled her, not merely to feed the multitude, but to carry home miraculous basketfuls, and more, methinks, than twelve.

And thus, to return to my main theme, there was, transmuting all her orthodoxy (and making her accept some unorthodox among her fellow-worshippers) a deep and fervent adoration of life and fruitfulness, and an abhorrence of death.

Her letters to me are full of it. Abhorrence of death. Death not of the body, for she held that but an incident, an accident almost, in a life eternal or universal ; but death of the soul. And this she would have defined, though she was never fond of defining, as loss of the power of extracting joy and multiplying it through thankfulness.

A matter less of belief than of temper. Of course. Gabrielle Delzant was one of the elect, and filled with grace. And she had as little sense of tragedy as St. Francis or his skylarks ; sympathy meaning for her less the fact of

Dedication

feeling the sufferings of others, than that of healing, of consoling, and of compensating.

With this went naturally that, in a very busy life, full—over-full, some of us thought—of the affairs of other folk, she never appeared worried or hurried. Of the numberless persons who carried their business to her, or whose secret troubles became manifest to her dear bluish-brown eyes, each must have felt as if she existed for him or her solely. And folk went to her as they go into a church of her religion, not merely for spiritual aid, but for the comfort of space and rest in this world of crowding and bustle ; for the sense of a piece of heaven closed in for one's need and all one's very own. Dear Madame Blanc, how many shy shadows do we not seem to see around us since her death ; or rather to guess at, roaming disconsolate, lacking they scarce know what, that ever-welcoming sanctuary of her soul !

I have compared it with a church ; but outwardly, and just because she was such a believer in life, it was more like a dwelling-place, like those brown corridors, full of books, at Paraës ; or that bedroom of hers, with the high lights all over the polished floor, and its

Dedication

look of a library. To me Gabrielle Delzant revealed the reality of what I had long guessed and longed for aimlessly, the care and grace of art, the consecration of religion, applied to the matters of every day. It hung together with her worship of life, with her belief, as she expressed it to you, all those years ago, *that life must be begun many times anew*. And it is this which, for all the appalling unexpectedness, the dreadful cataclysm of her temporal ending, has made the death of Gabrielle Delzant so strangely difficult, for me, at least, to realise as death at all.

Not death, but only absence ; and that, how partial !

It is eight months and more, dear Madame Blanc, since she and I bade each other adieu in the body. She had been some while ill, though none of us suspected how fatally. It was the eve of her departure for Paris ; and I was returning to Italy. She was grieved at parting from me, at leaving her dear old Southern relatives ; and secretly she perhaps half suspected that she might never come back to her Gascon home. It was a November day, dissolving fitfully into warm rain, and very

Dedication

melancholy. I was to take the late train to Agen with the two girls. And she and I, when all was ready, were to have the afternoon together. Of course we must have it serene, as if no parting were to close it. All traces of departure, of packing, were cleared away at her bidding, and when they had carried her on to her sofa, and placed by its side the little table with our books, and also my chair, she bade the dear Southern maids light a fine blaze of vine stumps, and fill all the jars with fresh roses—china roses, so vivid, surely none have ever smelt so sweet and poignant. We amused ourselves, a little sadly, burning some olive and myrtle branches I had brought for her from Corsica, and watching their frail silver twigs and leaves turn to embers and fall in fireworks of sparks and a smoke of incense. And we read together in one of my books (alas! that book has just come back this very same day, sent by her daughter), and looked up at the loose grey clouds suffused with rose and orange as the day drew to its end. Then the children shouted from below that the carriage was there, that I must go. We closed the books, marking the place, and I broke a

Dedication

rose from the nosegay on the fireplace. And we said farewell.

Thus have we remained, she and I. With the mild autumn day drawing to an end outside ; and within, the fresh roses, the bright fire she had asked for ; remained reading our books, watching those dried leaves turn to showers of sparks and smoke of incense. She and I, united beyond all power of death to part, in the loving belief that, even like that afternoon of packing up and bidding adieu, and rain and early twilight, life also should be made serene and leisurely, and simple and sweet, and akin to eternity.

And now I am going to put those volumes she and I had read together, on my own shelves, here in this house she never entered ; and to correct the proofs of this new little book, which should have been hers, nay, rather *is*, and which is also, my dear Madame Blanc, for that reason, yours.

I am, meanwhile, your grateful and affectionate friend,

VERNON LEE.

CONTENTS

	PAGE
DEDICATION	v
THE GARDEN OF LIFE—INTRODUCTORY	i
IN PRAISE OF GOVERNESSES	13
ON GOING TO THE PLAY	23
READING BOOKS	35
HEARING MUSIC	45
RECEIVING LETTERS	55
NEW FRIENDS AND OLD	65
OTHER FRIENDSHIPS	75
A HOTEL SITTING-ROOM	83
IN PRAISE OF COURTSHIP	95
KNOWING ONE'S MIND	103
AGAINST TALKING	117
IN PRAISE OF SILENCE	127
THE BLAME OF PORTRAITS	137
SERE AND YELLOW—INTERLUDE	149
A STAGE JEWEL	165

Contents

	PAGE
MY BICYCLE AND I	177
PUZZLES OF THE PAST	187
MAKING PRESENTS	199
GOING AWAY	209
COMING BACK	219
LOSING ONE'S TRAIN	229
THE HANGING GARDENS—VALEDICTORY	239

HORTUS VITAE

THE GARDEN OF LIFE

(INTRODUCTORY)

“Cela est bien dit,” répondit Candide ; “mais il faut cultiver notre jardin.”—ROMANS DE VOLTAIRE.

THE GARDEN OF LIFE

THIS by no means implies that the whole of life is a garden or could be made one. I am not sure even that we ought to try. Indeed, on second thoughts, I feel pretty certain that we ought not. Only such portion of life is our garden as lies, so to speak, close to our innermost individual dwelling, looked into by our soul's own windows, and surrounded by its walls. A portion of life which is ours exclusively, although we do occasionally lend its key to a few intimates ; ours to cultivate just as we please, growing therein either pistachios and dwarf lemons for preserving, like Voltaire's immortal hero, or more spiritual flowers, "sweet basil and mignonette," such as the Lady of Epipsychidion sent to Shelley ; kindly rosemary and balm ; or, as may happen, a fine assortment of witch's herbs, infallible for turning us into cats and toads and poisoning our neighbours.

Hortus Vitae

But with whatever we may choose to plant the portion of our life and our thought which is our own, and whatsoever its natural fertility and aspect, this much is certain, that it needs digging, watering, planting, and perhaps most of all, weeding. “Cela est bien dit,” répondit Candide, “mais il faut cultiver notre jardin.” He was, as you will recollect, answering Dr. Pangloss. One evening, while they were resting from their many tribulations, and eating various kinds of fruit and sweetmeats in their arbour on the Bosphorus, the eminent optimistic philosopher had pointed out at considerable length that the delectable moment they were enjoying was connected by a Leibnitzian chain of cause and effect with sundry other moments of a less obviously desirable character in the earlier part of their several lives.

“For, after all, my dear Candide,” said Dr. Pangloss, “let us suppose you had not been kicked out of a remarkably fine castle, magnis ac cogentissimis cum argumentis a posteriori ; suppose also that, etc., etc. had not happened, nor, furthermore, etc., etc., etc. ; well, it is quite plain that you would not be in this particular place, *videlicet* an arbour ; and,

The Garden of Life

moreover, in the act of eating preserved lemon-rind and pistachio nuts."

"What you say is true," answered Candide, "but we have to cultivate our garden."

And here I hasten to remark, that although I have quoted and translated these seven immortal words, I would on no account be answerable for their original and exact meaning, any more than for the meaning of more officially grave and reverend texts, albeit perhaps not wiser or nobler ones.

Did the long-suffering hero of the Sage of Ferney accept the chain of cause and effect, and agree that without the kicks, the earthquake, the *auto-da-fé*, and all the other items of his uneasy career, it was impossible he should be eating pistachio nuts and preserved lemon-rind in that arbour? And, in consideration of the bitter sweet of these delicacies, was he prepared to welcome (retrospectively) the painful preliminaries as blessings in disguise? Did he even, rising to stoical or mystic heights, identify these superficially different phenomena and recognize that their apparent contradiction was real sameness?

Or, should we take it that, refraining from

Hortus Vitae

such essential questions, and passing over his philosophical friend's satisfaction in the *causal nexus*, poor Candide was satisfied with pointing out the only practical lesson to be drawn from the whole matter, to wit, that in order to partake of such home-grown dainties, it had been necessary, and most likely would remain necessary, to put a deal of good work into whatever scrap of the soil of life had not been devastated by those Leibnitzian Powers who further Man's felicity in a fashion so energetic but so round-about?

All these points remain obscure. But even as a play is said to be only the better for the various interpretations which it affords to as many great actors; so methinks, the wisest sayings are often those which state some principle in general terms, leaving to individuals the practical working out, according to their nature and circumstances. So, whether we incline to optimism or to pessimism, we must do our best in the half-hours we can bestow upon our little garden.

I speak advisedly of half-hours, and I would repeatedly insist upon the garden being little. For the garden, whatever its actual size, and

The Garden of Life

were it as extensive as those of Eden and the Hesperides set on end, does not afford the exercise needful for spiritual health and vigour. And whatever we may succeed in growing there to please our taste or (like some virtuous dittany) to heal our bruises, this much is certain, that the power of enjoyment has to be brought from beyond its limits.

Happiness, dear fellow-gardeners, is not a garden plant.

In plain English : happiness is not the aim of life, although it is life's furtherance and in the long run life's *sine qua non*. And not being life's aim, life often disregards the people who pursue it for its own sake. I am not, like Dr. Pangloss, a professional philosopher, and what philosophy I have is of no particular school, and neither stoical nor mystic. I feel no sort of call to vindicate the Ways of Providence ; and on the whole there seems something rather ill-bred in crabbing the unattainable, and pretending that what we can't have can't be good for us. Happiness *is* good for us, excellent for us, necessary for us, indispensable to us. But . . . how put such transcendental facts into common or garden (for it is *garden*) language ? But we

Hortus Vitae

—that is to say, poor human beings—are one thing, and life is quite another. And as life has its own programme irrespective of ours, to wit, apparently its own duration and intensifying throughout all changes, it is quite natural that we, its little creatures of a second, receive what we happen to ask for—namely, happiness—as a reward for being thoroughly alive.

Now, for some reason not of our choosing, we cannot be thoroughly alive except as a result of such exercises as come under the headings : Work and Duty. That seems to be the law of Life—of Life which does not care a button about being æsthetic or wisely epicurean. The truth of it is brought home to us occasionally in one of those fine symbolical intuitions which are the true stuff of poetry, because they reveal the organic unity and symmetry of all existence. I am alluding to the sense of cloying and restlessness which comes to most of us (save when tired or convalescent) after a very few days or even hours shut up in quite the finest real gardens ; and to that instinct, impelling some of us to inquire about the lodges and the ways out, the very first thing on coming down into some private park. Of course they are quite

The Garden of Life

exquisite, those flowery terraces cut in the green turf, and bowling greens set with pines or statues, and balustraded steps with jars and vases. And the great stretches of park land with their solemn furrowed avenues and their great cedars stretching *moire* skirts on to the grass, are marvellous fine things to look upon. . . .

But we want the ploughed fields beyond, the real woods with stacked-up timber, German fashion ; the orchards and the kitchen gardens ; the tracks across the high-lying sheep downs ; the towing-paths where the barges come up the rivers ; the deep lanes where the hay-carts have left long wisps on the overhanging elms ; the high-roads running from village to village, with the hooded carts and bicycles and even the solemn Juggernaut traction-engines upon them. We want not only to rest from living, to take refreshment in life's kindly pauses and taste (like Candide in his arbour) the pleasantness of life's fruits. We want also to live.

But there is living and living. There is, unfortunately, not merely such breezy work-a-dayness as we have been talking of, but something very different indeed beyond the

Hortus Vitae

walls of our private garden. There are black, oozy factory yards and mangy grass-plots heaped with brickbat and refuse ; and miles of iron railing, and acres of gaunt and genteel streets not veiled enough in fog ; a metaphorical *beyond the garden walls*, in which a certain number of us graduate for the ownership of sooty shrubberies and clammy orchid houses. And we poor latter-day mortals have become so deadly accustomed to the routine of useless work and wasteful play, that a writer must needs cross all the *t*'s and dot all the *i*'s of his conviction (held also by other sentimentalists and cranks called Carlyle, Ruskin, and Morris) that the bread and wine of life are not grown in the Black Country ; no, nor life's flowers in the horticultural establishments (I will not call them gardens) of suburban villas.

Fortunately, however, this casual-looking universe is not without its harmonies, as well as ironies. And one of these arrangements would seem to be that our play educates the aims and methods of our work. If we lay store by satisfactions which imply the envy and humiliation of other folk, why then we set about such work as humiliates our neighbours

The Garden of Life

or fills them with envyousness, saving the case where others, sharing our tastes, do alike by us. Without going to such lengths (the mention of which has got me a reputation for lack of human sympathy) there remains the fact that if our soul happen to take delight in, let us say, futility—well, then, futility will litter existence with shreds of coloured paper and plaster comfits trodden into mud, as after a day of carnival at Nice. Nay, a still simpler case: if we cannot be happy without a garden as big as the grounds of an expensive lunatic asylum, why, then, all the little cottage gardens down the lane must be swept away to make it.

Now, the cottage gardens, believe me, are the best. They are the only ones which, being small, may be allotted in some juster future to every man without dispossessing his neighbour. And they are also the only ones compatible with that fine arable or dairy country which we all long for. Stop and look over the hedges: their flowers leave no scrap of earth visible between them, like the bedded-out things of grander gardens; and their vivid crimsons, and tender rose and yellow, and ineffable blue,

Hortus Vitae

and the solemn white which comes out in the evening, are seen to most advantage against the silvery green of vegetables behind them, and the cornfield, the chalk-pit under the beech trees beyond. The cottage flowers come also into closer quarters with their owners, not merely because these breathe their fragrance and the soil's good freshness while stooping down to weed, and prune, and water ; but also, and perhaps even more, because the flowers we tend with our own hands have a habit of blooming in our expectations and filling our hopes with a sweetness which not the most skilful hired gardeners have ever taught the most far-fetched hybrids that they raise for clients.

Which, being interpreted, may be taken to mean that it is no use relying on artists, poets, philosophers, or saints to make something of the enclosed spaces or the waste portions of our soul : *Il faut cultiver notre jardin.*

IN PRAISE OF GOVERNESSES

IN PRAISE OF GOVERNESSES

EVEN before discovering that there was an old, gabled, lower town at Cassel, I felt the special gladness of the touch of Germany. It was an autumn morning, bright yet tender. I sped along the wide, empty streets, across the sanded square, with hedges of sere lime trees, where a big, periwigged Roman Emperor of an Elector presides, making one think of the shouts of "Hurrah, lads, for America!" of the bought and sold Hessians of Schiller's "Cabal and Love." At the other end was a promenade, terraced above the yellow tree-tops of a park, above a gentle undulating country, with villages and steeples in the distance. "Schöneaussicht" the place called itself; and the view was looked at by the wide and many windows of pleasant old-fashioned houses, with cocked-hat roofs well pulled down over them,

Hortus Vitae

each in its little garden of standard roses, all quiet and smiling in the autumn sunshine.

I felt the special gladness of being in Germany (for every country has its own way of making us happy), and glad that there should be in me something which answered to Germany's especial touch. We owe that, many of us, I mused, and with it a deep debt of gratitude, to our governesses. And I fell to thinking of certain things which an American friend had lately told me, sitting in the twilight with her head a little averted, about a certain governess of hers I can remember from my childhood. Pathetic things, heroic ones, nothings ; all ending off in the story of a farewell letter, treasured many years, lost on a journey. . . . "Do you remember Fraülein's bonnet ? The one she brought from Hanover and wore that winter in Paris ?" And there it was in a faded, crinolined photograph, so dear and funny. Dear and funny—that is the point of this relationship with creatures giving often the best of the substance and form of our soul, that it is without the sometimes rather empty majesty of the parental one. And surely it is no loss, but rather a gain, to have to smile, as my

In Praise of Governesses

friend did at the thought of that Teutonic bonnet, just when we feel an awkward huskiness in our voice.

There is, moreover, a particular possibility for good in the relation between a developing child (not, of course, a mere growing young brute) and a woman still young, childless, or separated from her children, a little solitary, most often alien, differently brought up, and whose affection and experience must therefore take a certain impersonality, and tend to subdued romance. We are loved, when we are, not as a matter of course and habit, not with any claim ; but for ourselves and with the delicate warmth of a feeling necessarily one-sided. And whatever we learn of life in this relationship is of one very different from our own, and seen through the feelings, the imagination, often the repressed home-sickness, of a mature and foreign soul. And this is good for us, and useful in correcting family and national tradition, and the rubbing away of angles (and other portions of soul) by brothers and sisters, and general contemporaries, excellent educational items of which it is possible to have a little too much.

Be this as it may, it is to our German

Hortus Vitae

governesses that we owe the power of understanding Germany, more than to German literature. For the literature itself requires some introduction of mood for its romantic, homely, sentimental, essentially German qualities ; the mere Anglo-Saxon or Latin being, methinks, incapable of caring at once for *Wilhelm Meister*, or *Siebennkäs*, or *Götz*, or the manifold lyric of Forest and Millstream. To understand these, means to have somewhere in us a little sample, some fibres and corpuscles, of the German heart. And I maintain that we are all of us the better, of whatever nationality (and most, perhaps, we rather too-too solid Anglo-Saxons) for such transfusion of a foreign element, correcting our deficiencies and faults, and ripening (as the literature of Italy ripened our Elizabethans) our own intrinsic qualities. It means, apart from negative service against conceit and canting self-aggrandisement, an additional power of taking life intelligently and serenely ; a power of adaptation to various climates and diets of the spirit, let alone the added wealth of such varied climates and diets themselves. Italy, somehow, attains this by her mere visible aspect and her history : a pure,

In Praise of Governesses

high sky, a mountain city, or a row of cypresses can teach as much as Dante, and, indeed, teach us to understand Dante himself. While as to France, that most lucid of articulately-speaking lands, explains herself in her mere books ; and we become in a manner French with every clear, delightful page we read, and almost every thought of our own we ever think with definiteness and grace. But the genius of Germany is, like her landscape, homely and sentimental, with the funny goodness and dearness of a good child ; and we must learn to know it while we ourselves are children. And therefore it is from our governesses that we learn (with dimmer knowledge of mysterious persons or things “Ulfilas”—“Tacitus’s Germania,” supposed by me to have been a lady, his daughter perhaps, and the “seven stars” of German literature) a certain natural affinity with the Germany of humbler and greater days, when no one talked of Teuton superiority or of purity of Teuton idiom ; the Germany which gave Kant, and Beethoven, and Goëthe and Schiller, and was not ashamed to say “scharmant.”

I, too, was taught to say “scharmant” and “amüsiren.” It was wrong, very wrong ; and

Hortus Vitae

I feel my inferiority every time I come to Germany, and have to pause and think by what combination of words I can express the true Germanic functions and nature of booking offices and bicycle labels. For it was long ago : Count Bismarck was still looked on as a dangerous upstart, and we reckoned in kreutzers ; blue and white Austrian bands played at Mainz and Frankfurt. It was long ago that I was, so to speak, a small German infant, fed on Teutonic romance and sentiment (and also funny Teutonic prosaicalness, bless it !) by a dim procession of Germania's daughters. There was Franziska, who could boast a Rhineland pastor for grandfather, a legendary pastor bearding Napoleon ; Franziska, who read Schiller's " Maria Stuart " and " Joan of Arc," and even his " Child Murderess " (I remember every word of obloquy hurled at the hangman—"hangman, craven hangman, canst thou not break off a lily ") to the housemaid and me whenever my father and mother went out of an evening ; and described " Papagena," in Mozart's opera which she had seen, all dressed in feathers ; and was tempted to strum furtive melancholy chords on my mother's zither. . . . Dear Franziska,

In Praise of Governesses

whose comfortable blond good looks inspired the enamoured upholsterer in letters beginning “ My dearest little goldfish ”—Franziska, what has become of thee ? And the Frau Professor, who averred with rhythmic iteration that teaching such a child was far, far worse than breaking stones on a high-road ; in what stony regions may she have found an honoured stony grave ? What has become of genial Mme. E., who played the Jupiter Symphonie with my mother, instead of hearing me through my scales, and lent me volumes of Tonkünstler-Lexikons to soothe her conscience, and gave us honey in the comb out of her garden of verbena and stocks ? But best of all, dearest, far above all the others, and quite different, Marie S., charming enthusiastic young schoolmistress in that little town of pepper-pot towers and covered bridges, you I have found again ; I shall soon see your eyes and hear your voice, quite unchanged, I am certain. And we shall sit and talk (your big daughter listening, perhaps not without an occasional smile) about those hours which you and I, a girl of twenty and a child of eleven, spent in the little room above the rushing Alpine river, eating apples and drinking

Hortus Vitae

café au lait; hours in which a whole world of legend and poetry, and scientific fact and theory more wonderful still, passed from your ardent young mind into the little eager puzzled one of your loving pupil. We shall meet very soon, a little awkwardly at first, perhaps, but after a moment talking as if no silence of thirty years had ever parted us ; as if nothing had happened in between, as if all that might then have come true . . . well, could come true still.

These thoughts came into my head that morning in the promenade at Cassel, brought to the surface by the mellow autumn sun and the special pleasure of being again in Germany. There mingled with them also that recent conversation about the lady with the bonnet from Hanover, who had written that paper so precious to my American friend. And I determined to take my pen some day I should feel suitably happy, and offer up thanks for all of us to our governesses, to those dear women, dead, dispersed, faded into distance, but not forgotten ; our spiritual foster-mothers who put a few drops of the milk of German kindness, of German simplicity and quaintness and romance, between our lips when we were children.

ON GOING TO THE PLAY

ON GOING TO THE PLAY

WE were comparing notes the other day on plays and playgoing. My friend was Irish ; so, finding to our joy that we disliked this form of entertainment equally, we swore with fervour that we would go to the play together.

Mankind may be divided into playgoers and not playgoers ; and the first are far more numerous, and also far more illustrious. It evidently is a defect, and perhaps a sign of degeneracy, akin to deafness or to Daltonism, not to enjoy the theatre ; not to enjoy it, at least in the reality, when there or just after coming away. For I can enjoy the thought of the play, and the thought of other folks liking it, so long as I am not taken there. There is something pleasant in thinking of those brilliant places, full of unrealities, with crowds engulfing themselves into this light

Hortus Vitae

from out of the dreary, foggy streets. Also, of young enthusiastic creatures, foregoing dinner, waiting for hours in cheap seats (like Charles and Mary Lamb before they had money to buy rare prints and blue china), with the delight of spending hoarded pennies ; all under circumstances of the deepest bodily discomfort. I leave out of the question the thought of Greek theatres, of that semicircle of steps on the top of Fiesole, with cypresses for side scenes, and, even now, lyric tragedies more than *Æschylean* enacted by clouds and winds in the amphitheatre of mountains beyond. I am thinking of the play as we moderns know it, with a sense of stuffiness as an integral part. Indeed, that stuffiness is by no means its worst feature. The most thrilling moment, I will confess, which theatres can still give me is that —but it is really *sui generis* and ineffable—when, having got upstairs, you meet in the narrow lobbies of an old-fashioned playhouse the tuning of the fiddles and the smell—of gas, glue, heaven knows what glories of yester-year—which, ever since one's babyhood, has come to mean “the play.” People have expended much genius and more money to make theatrical

On Going to the Play

representation transcend imagination ; but they can never transcend that moment in the corridor, *never transcend that smell.*

Here is, most probably, one of my chief motives of dissatisfaction. I do not like the play—the play at the theatre—because it invariably falls short of that in my imagination. I make an exception for music ; but not for the visible theatrical accompaniments thereof. Well given on the stage, *Don Giovanni*, for instance, remains but the rather bourgeois play of Molière ; leave me and the music together, and I promise you that all the romance and terror and wonder of ten thousand Spains are distilled into my fancy !

The fact is that, being an appeal to the imagination of others, every form of literature, every “deed of speech,” as a friend of mine calls it, has a natural stage in the mind of the reader or the listener. Milton, let me point out, makes “gorgeous Tragedy in sceptred pall,” sweep across, not the planks of a theatre, but the scholar’s thought as he sits alone with his book of nights. Neither is this an expression of conceit. I do not mean that *my* conception of this, that, or the other is better, or as good

Hortus Vitae

as, what a great actor or a clever manager can set before me. Nothing of the sort ; but my conception *is better suited to me.* Its very vagueness answers, nine times out of ten, to my repugnance and my preference ; and the high lights, the vividly realized portions emerging from that vagueness, represent *what I like.* Hamlet or Portia or Viola and Olivia, exist for me under the evocation of the magician Shakespeare, but formed of recollections, impressions of places, people, and other poets, floating coloured atomies, which have a brooding charm, as being mine ; why should they be scared off, replaced, by detailed real personalities who, even if charming, are most likely alien ?

I cannot very well conceive how people enjoy such substitutions. Perhaps they have more sensitive fancy and warmer sympathies than I ; but as to mine, I had rather they were let alone. I can quite understand that it is different with children and with uneducated persons : their imagination is at once more erratic than ours (less tied by the logical necessities of details, less perceptive of these), and, at the same time, their imagination is not as thoroughly well stocked, and as ready to

On Going to the Play

ignite almost spontaneously, as is ours. Much reading, travelling, much contemplation of human beings, apart from practical reasons, has given even the least creative of us lazy, grown-up folk a power, almost a habit, of imaginative creation ; and 'but a very little, though a genial, pressure will make it act. But children and the people require stronger stimulus, and require also a field for their imagination to work upon. I can remember the amazing effect, entirely at variance with the intention, which portions of *Don Quixote*—seen at a circus, of all places—made on my mind when I was eight : it did not *realize* ideas of chivalry which I had, but, on the contrary, it gave me, from outside, data (such data !) about chivalry on which my thoughts wove ideas the most amazing for many months. Something of the kind, I think, is happening to that Paris audience, rows and rows of eager heads and seeing eyes, which M. Carrière has painted, just enough visible, in his usual luminous haze, to give the mood. The stage is not shown : it really is in those eyes and faces. It is telling them that there are worlds different from their own ; it is opening out perspectives (longer

Hortus Vitae

and deeper than those of wood and cardboard) down which those cabined thoughts and feelings may henceforth wander. The picture, like M. Carrière's "Morning" in the Luxembourg, is one of the greatest of poetic pictures ; and it makes me, at least, understand what the value of the stage must be to hundreds and thousands of people ; to *the people*, to children, and to those practical natures which, however learned and cultured, seem unable to get imaginative, emotional pleasure without a good deal of help from outward mechanism.

These are all negative reasons why I dislike the play. But there are positive ones also. There is a story told by Lamb—or is it Hazlitt?—of a dear man who could not bear to read *Othello*, because of the dreadful fate of the Moor and his bride ; "Such a noble gentleman ! Such a sweet lady !" he would repeat, deeply distressed. The man was not artistic-souled ; but I am like him. I know the healing anodyne in narrative, the classic consolation which that kind priest mentioned by Renan offered his congregation : "It took place so long ago that perhaps it never took place at all." But on the stage, when Salvini puts

On Going to the Play

his terrible, suffused face out of Desdemona's curtains, it is not the past, but the present ; there is no lurking hope that it may not be true. And I do not happen to wish to see such realities as that. Moreover, there are persons—my Irish friend and I, for instance—who feel abashed at what affects us as eavesdropping on our part. It is quite right we should be there to listen to some splendid piece of poetry, Romeo's duet with Juliet, the moonlight quartet of Lorenzo, Jessica, Olivia, and Nerissa, and parts of *Winter's Tale* ; things which in musical quality transcend all music. But is it right that we be present at the unpacking of our neighbour's most private moral properties ; at the dreadful laying bare of other folk's sores and nakedness ? I wonder sometimes that any of the audience can look at the stage in company with the rest ; the natural man, one would expect, would have the lights of the pit extinguished, and, if he needs must pry, pry at least unobserved.

There is, however, an exception : when modern drama, instead of merely smuggling us, as by an ignominious King Candaules' ring called a theatre ticket, to witness what we

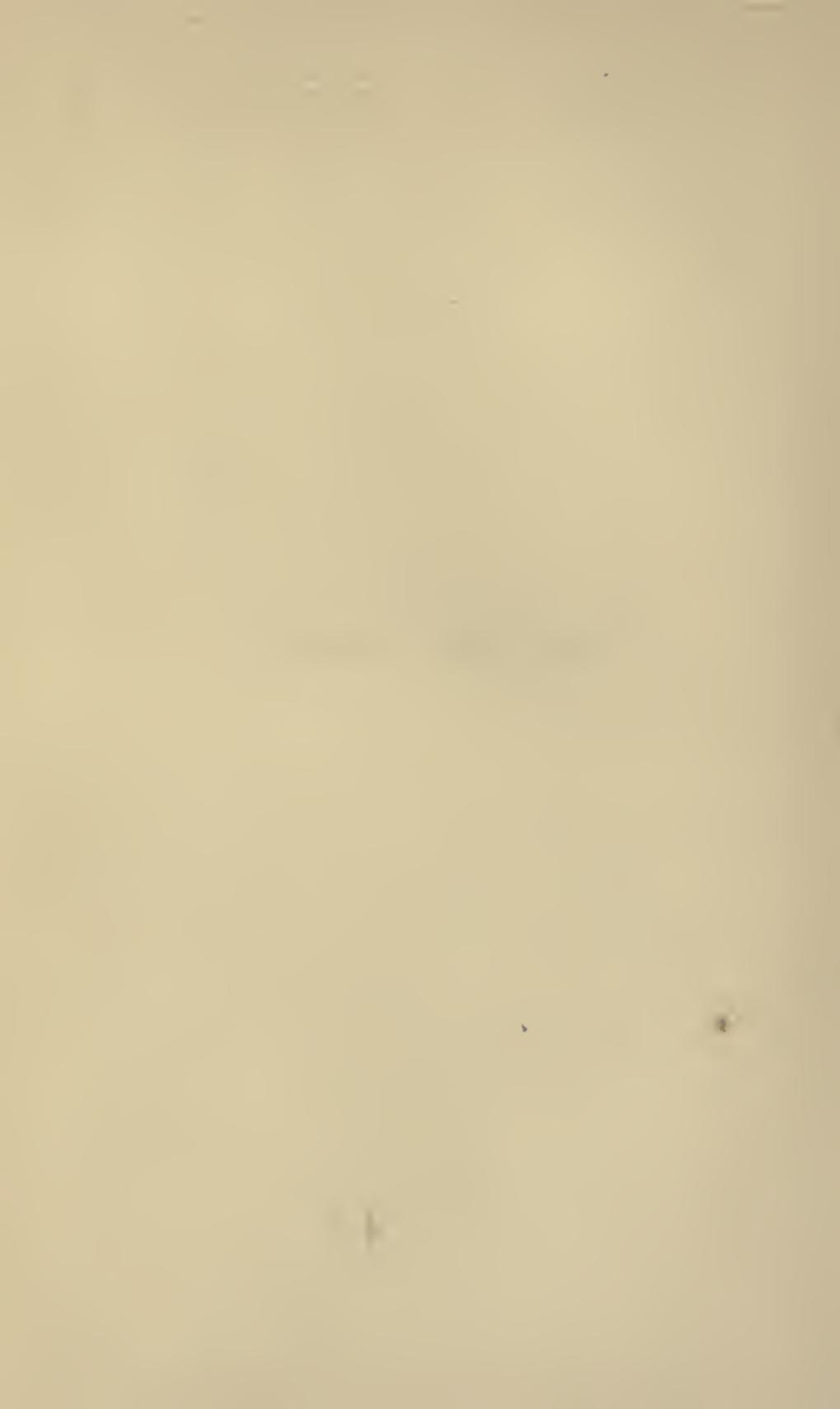
Hortus Vitae

shouldn't, gives us the spectacle of delightful personality, of individual power of soul, in its more intimate and perfect strength. I feel this sometimes in the case of Mme. Duse; and principally in her "*Magda*." This is good to see; as it is good to see naked muscles, to watch the efforts, the triumphant grace and strength of an athlete. For in this play of *Magda* the Duse rivets interests, delights not by what she does, but by what she is. The plot, the turn of the action, is of no consequence; it might be all reversed, and most of it omitted. We care not what a creature like this happens to be doing or suffering; we care for her existence because it means energy and charm. Why not deliberately aim at such effects? Now that the stage is no longer the mere concert-room for magnificent poetry, lyric or epic, it might become what would be consonant with our modern psychologic tastes, the place where the genius of author or actor allowed us to come in sight, with the fulness and completeness of the intentional and artificial, of those finest spectacles of all, *great temperaments*. Not merely guess at them, see them by casual glimpses, as in real life; nor

On Going to the Play

reconstruct them by their words and deeds, as in books ; but actually see them revealed, homogeneous, consecutive, in their gestures and tones, the whole, the *very being*, of which words and acts are but the partial manifestation. Methinks that in this way the play might add enormously to the suggestiveness, the delight and dignity of life ; play-acting might become a substantive art, not a mere spoiling of the work of poetry. Methinks that if this happened, or happened often, my friend and I, who also hates the play. . . . But it seems probable, on careful consideration, that my friend and I are conspicuously devoid of the dramatic faculty ; which being the case we had better not discuss plays and play-going at all.

READING BOOKS



READING BOOKS

THE chief point to be made in this matter is: that books, to fulfil their purpose, do not always require to be read. A book, for instance, which is a present, or an "hommage de l'auteur," has already served its purpose, like a visiting-card or a luggage label, at best like a ceremonial bouquet ; and it is absurd to try and make it serve twice over, by reading it. The same applies, of course, to books lent without being asked for, and, in a still higher degree, to a book which has been discussed in society, and thus furnished out a due amount of conversation ; to read such a book is an act of pedantry, showing slavishness to the names of things, and lack of insight into their real nature, which is revealed by the function they have been able to perform. Fancy, if public

Hortus Vitae

characters had to learn to snuff—a practice happily abandoned—because they occasionally received gifts of enamelled snuffboxes from foreign potentates !

But there are subtler sides to this subject, and it is of these I fain would speak. We are apt to blunt our literary sense by reading far too much, and to lessen our capacity for getting the great delights from books by making reading into a routine and a drudgery. Of course I know that reading books has its utilitarian side, and that we have to consider printed matter (let me never call it literature !) as the raw material whence we extract some of the information necessary to life. But long familiarity with an illiterate peasantry like the Italian one, inclines me to think that we grossly exaggerate the need of such book-grown knowledge. Except as regards scientific facts and the various practices—as medicine, engineering, and the like, founded on them—such knowledge is really very little connected with life, either practical or spiritual, and it is possible to act, to feel, and even to think and to express one's self with propriety and grace, while having simply no literature at all behind one.

Reading Books

That this is really no paradox is proved by pointing to the Greeks, who, even in the time of Plato—let alone the time, whenever that was, of Homer—had not much more knowledge of books than my Italian servant, who knows a few scraps of Tasso, possesses a “Book of Dreams ; or Key to the Lottery,” and uses the literature I have foolishly bestowed upon him as blotters in which to keep loose bills, and wherein occasionally to do addition sums. So that the fact seems to be that reading books is useful chiefly to enable us to wish to read more books !

How many times does one not feel checked, when on the point of lending a book to what we call uneducated persons, by wondering what earthly texture of misapprehension and blanks they will weave out of its allusions and suggestions ? And the same is the case of children. What fitter reading for a tall Greek goddess of ten than the tale of Cupid and Psyche, the most perfect of fairy stories with us ; wicked sisters, subterranean adventures, ants helping to sort seeds, and terrible awaking drops of hot oil spilt over the bridegroom ? But when I read to her this afternoon, shall I

Hortus Vitae

not see quite plainly over the edge of the book, that all the things which make it just what it is to me—the indescribable quality of the South, of antiquity and paganism—are utterly missed out ; and that, to this divine young nymph, “Cupid and Psyche” is distinguishable from, say, “Beauty and the Beast” only by the unnecessary addition of a lot of heathenish names and the words which she does not even want to understand ? Hence literature, alas ! is, so to speak, for the literate ; and one has to have read a great, great deal in order to taste the special exquisiteness of books, their marvellous essence of long-stored up, oddly mixed, subtly selected and hundredfold distilled suggestion.

But once this state of things reached, there is no need to read much ; and every reason for not *keeping up*, as vain and foolish persons boast, “with literature.” Since, the time has come, after planting and grafting and dragging watering-pots, for flowering and fruition ; for books to do their best, to exert their full magic. This is the time when a verse, imperfectly remembered, will haunt the memory ; and one takes down the book, reads it and what follows,

Reading Books

judiciously breaking off, one's mind full of the flavour and scent. Or, again, talking with a friend, a certain passage of prose—the account of the Lambs going to the play when young, or the beginning of “Urn Burial,” or a chapter (with due improvised skippings) of “Candide”—comes up in conversation ; and one reads it rejoicing with one's friends, feeling the special rapture of united comprehension, of mind touching mind, like the little thrill of voice touching voice on the resolving sevenths of the old duets in thirds. Or even when, remembering some graver page—say the dedication of “Faust” to Goethe's dead contemporaries—one fetches the book and reaches it silently to the other one, not daring to read it out loud. . . . It is when these things happen that one is really getting the good of books ; and that one feels that there really is something astonishing and mysterious in words taken out of the dictionary and arranged with commas and semicolons and full stops between them.

The greatest pleasures of reading consist in re-reading. Sometimes almost in not reading at all, but just thinking or feeling what there is

Hortus Vitae

inside the book, or what has come out of it, long ago, and passed into one's mind or heart, as the case may be. I wish to record in this reference a happy week once passed, at vintage time, in the Lower Apennines, with a beautiful copy of "Hippolytus," bound in white, which had been given me, regardless of my ignorance of Greek, by my dear Lombard friend who resembles a faun. I carried it about in my pocket ; sometimes, at rare intervals, spelling out some word in *mai* or in *totos*, and casting a glance on the interleaved crib ; but more often letting the volume repose by me on the grass and crushed mint of the cool yard under the fig tree, while the last belated cicala sawed, and the wild bees hummed in the ivy flower of the old villa wall. For once you know the spirit of a book, there is a process (known to Petrarch with reference to Homer, whom he was unable to understand) of taking in its charm by merely turning over the pages, or even, as I say, in carrying it about. The literary essence, which is uncommonly subtle, has various modes of acting on us ; and this particular manner of absorbing a book's spirit stands to the material operation called *reading*, much in the same way

Reading Books

that *smell*, the act of breathing invisible volatile particles, stands to the more obvious wholesale process of *taste*.

Nay, such is the virtuous power of books, that, to those who are initiated and reverent, it can act from the mere title, or more properly, the binding. Of this I had an instance quite lately in the library of an old Jacobite house on the North Tyne. This library contained, besides its properly embodied books, a small collection existing, so to speak, only in the spirit, or at least in effigy ; a door, to wit, being covered with real book-backs, or, more properly, backs of real books of which the inside was missing. A quaint, delightful collection ! “Female traits,” two volumes ; four volumes (what dinners and breakfasts, as well as suppers, of horrors !) of Webster’s “Vittoria Corombona,” etc., the “Siege of Mons,” “Ancient Mysteries,” “The Epigrams of Martial,” “A Journey through Italy,” and Crébillon’s novels. Contemplating these pseudo shelves of pageless tomes, I felt acutely how true it is that a book (for the truly lettered) can do its work without being read. I lingeringly relished (why did not Johnson give us a verb

Hortus Vitae

to *saporate*?) this mixed literature's flavour, humorous, romantic, and pedantic, beautifully welded. And I recognized that those gutted-away insides were quite superfluous : they had yielded their essence and their virtue.

HEARING MUSIC



HEARING MUSIC

“HEARD melodies,” said Keats, “are sweet ; but those unheard are sweeter.” The remark is not encouraging to performers, yet, saving their displeasure, there is some truth in it.

We give too much importance, nowadays, being busy and idle and mercantile (compatible qualities, alas !) to the material presence of everything, its power of filling time or space, and particularly of becoming an item of our budget ; forgetful that of the very best things the material presence is worthless save as first step to a spiritual existence within our soul. This is particularly the case with music. There is nothing in the realm of sound at all corresponding to the actual photographing of a visible object on the retina ; our auditive apparatus, whatever its mysteries, gives no sign

Hortus Vitae

of being in any way of the nature of a phonograph. Moreover, one element of music is certainly due to the sense of locomotion, the *rhythm*; so that *sound*, to become music, requires the attention of something more than the mere ear. Nay, it would seem, despite the contrary assertion of the learned *Stumpf*, that the greater number of writers on the vexed science of sound incline to believe that the hearing of music is always attended with movements, however imperceptible, in the throat, which, being true, would prove that, in a fashion, we *perform* the melodies which we think we only *hear*; living echoes, nerves vibrating beneath the composer's touch as literally as does the string of the fiddle, or its wooden fibres. A very delicate instrument this, called the *Hearer*, and, as we all know, more liable to being out of tune, to refusing to act altogether, than any instrument (fortunately for performers) hitherto made by the hand of man. Thus, in a way, one might paraphrase the answer which Mme. Gabbrielli is said to have made to the Empress Catherine, “Your Majesty’s policemen can make me *scream*, not *sing*!” and say to some queen of piano keys or emperor of *ut de poitrine*

Hearing Music

that there is no violence or blandishment which can secure the *inner ear*, however much the outer ear may be solicited or bullied.

'Tis in this sense, methinks, that we should understand the saying of Keats—to wit, that in a great many cases the happiest conjunction of music and the soul occurs during what the profane call silence ; the very fact of music haunting our mind, while every other sort of sound may be battering our ear, showing our highest receptivity. And, as a fact, we do not know that real musicians, *real* Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha and Abt Voglers, not written ones, require organs neither of glass nor of metal ; but build their palaces of sound on a plain deal table with a paper covered with little lines and dots before them ? And was not Beethoven, in what some folk consider his mightiest era, as deaf as a post ?

I do not advocate deafness. Nay, privately, being quite incapable of deciphering a score, I confess that there is something dry and dreary in absolutely soundless music—music which from the silent composer passes to the silent performer, who is at the same time a silent listener, without the neighbours being even one

Hortus Vitae

bit the wiser? Besides, were this gift universal, it would deprive us of that delightful personality the mere performer, whose high-strung nervousness, or opulent joviality, is, after all, a pleasant item in art, a humorous dramatic interlude, in the excessive spirituality of music.

I am not, therefore, in favour of absolute silence in the art of sounds. I am only asking people to remember that sound waves and the auditive apparatus put in connection, even if the connection costs a guinea, is not enough to secure the real *hearing* of music; or, if this formula appear too vulgar, asking them to repeat to themselves those lines of Keats. I feel sure that so doing would save much of that dreadful bitterness and dryness of soul, a state of conscious non-receptivity corresponding in musical experience with what ascetic writers call “spiritual aridity”—which must occasionally depress even the most fortunate of listeners. For, look in thy conscience, O friendly fellow-concert-goer, and say truly, hast thou not, many times and oft, sat to no purpose upon narrow seats, blinded by gas, with no outlook save alien backs and bonnets, while divinest

Hearing Music

music flowed all around, yet somehow wetted
not thy thirsty and irritated soul ?

The recognition of this fact would not only diminish such painful moments (or rather, alas ! *hours*), but would teach us to endure them cheerfully as the preparation for future enjoyment, the garnering for private and silent enjoyment. "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard," etc., would act like Joseph's interpretation of the fat and lean kine of Pharaoh ; we should consider concerts and musical festivals as fatiguing, even exhausting, employments, the strain of which was rendered pleasant by the anticipation of much ease and delight to come.

Connected with this question is that of amateur performance. The amateur seems nowadays to waste infinite time in vying with the professional person instead of becoming acquainted, so to speak, with the composer. It is astonishing how very little music the best amateurs are acquainted with, because they must needs perform everything they know. This, in most cases, is sheer waste, for, in the way of performers, the present needs of mankind (as Auguste Comte remarked about

Hortus Vitae

philosophers) can be amply met by twenty thousand professionals. And many families would, from a spirit of moderation, forego the possession of an unpaid professional in the shape of a daughter or an aunt. One of the chief uses, indeed, of the professional performers should be to suppress amateurs by furnishing a standard of performance which lovers of music would silently apply to the music which formed the daily delight of their inner ear.

For, if we care veraciously for music, we think of it, *or think it*, as it ought to be performed, not as we should ourselves perform it. Nay, more, I feel convinced that truly musical persons, such as can really understand a master's thoughts, are not distressed by the shortcomings of their own performance, the notes they play or sing merely serving to suggest those which they hear.

This transcendental doctrine (fraught, I confess, like all transcendent truths, with gravest practical dangers) was matured in my mind by friendship with one of the most singular of musicians. This person (since deceased, and by profession a clerk) suffered from nervousness

Hearing Music

so excessive that, despite a fair knowledge of music, the fact of putting his hands upon the keys produced a maddening sort of stammer, let alone a notable tendency to strike wrong notes and miss his octaves ; peculiarities of which he was so morbidly conscious that it was only an accident which revealed to me, after years of acquaintance, that he ever played the piano at all. Yet I know as a fact that this poor blundering player, who stopped convulsively if he heard steps in the passage, and actually *closed the lid of his instrument* when the maid came in with the tea-things, was united more closely with the divine ones of music during his excruciating performance, than many a listener at a splendid concert. Mozart, for whom he had a special *cultus*, would surely have felt satisfied, if his clairvoyant spirit had been abroad, with my friend's marvellous bungling over that first finale of "Don Giovanni." The soul, the whole innermost nervous body (which felt of the shape of the music, fluid and infinitely sensitive) of the poor creature at the piano would draw itself up, parade grandly through that minuet, dance it in glory with the most glorious ghosts of glorious ladies—pshaw !

Hortus Vitae

not with anything so trifling ! Dance it *with the notes themselves*, would sway with them, bow to them, rise to them, live with them, become in fact part and parcel of the music itself. . . .

So, to return whence I began, it is no use imagining that we necessarily hear music by going to concerts and festivals and operas, exposing our bodily ear to showers and floods of sound, unless we happen to be in the right humour, unless we dispose, at the moment, of that rare and capricious thing—the *inner ear*.

RECEIVING LETTERS

RECEIVING LETTERS

I THINK I shall not treat of writing them.

That is a different matter, with pains and pleasures of its own, which do not correspond (the word fits nicely to this subject) with those of letters received. For 'tis a metaphysical mistake, or myth of language, like those victoriously exposed by the ingenious *M. Tarde*, to regard the reading of a letter as the symmetrical opposite (the right glove matching the left, or *inside of an outside*) of the writing thereof. Save in the case of lovers or moonstruck persons, like those in Emerson's essay on "Friendship," the reading of a letter is necessarily less potent, and, as the French say, *intimate*, in emotion, than the writing of it. Indeed, we catch ourselves repeatedly thrusting into our pocket for perusal at greater leisure those very letters which poured out like burning

Hortus Vitae

lava from their writers, or were conned over lovingly, lingeringly altered and rewritten ; and we wonder sometimes at our lack of sympathy and wonder also (with cynicism or blushes) whether our letters also, say that one of Tuesday—— But no ; *our* letters are not egoistical . . .

The thought is not one to be dwelt on in an essay, which is nothing if it is not pleasing. So I proceed to note also that pleasure at the contents has nothing to do with the little excitement of the arrival of the post-bag, or of watching the clerk's slow evolutions at a *poste restante* window. That satisfaction is due to the mere moment's hope for novelty, the flash past of the outer world, and the comfortable sense of having a following, friends, relatives, clients ; and it is in proportion to the dulness of our surroundings. Great statesmen or fortunate lovers, methinks, must turn away from aunts' and cousins' epistles, and from the impression of so and so up the Nile, or on first seeing Rome. Indeed, I venture to suggest that only the monotony of our forbears' lives explains the existence of those endless volumes of dreary allusions and pointless anecdote

Receiving Letters

handed down to us as the Correspondence of Sir Somebody This, or of the beautiful Countess of That, or even of Blank, that prince of coffee-house wits. The welcome they received in days when (as is recorded by Scott) the mail occasionally arrived at Edinburgh carrying only one single letter, has given such letters a reputation for delightfulness utterly disconnected with any intrinsic merit, but which we sycophantishly accept after a hundred or two hundred years, handing it on with hypocritical phrases about "quaintness," and "vivid picture of the past," and similar nonsense. But the Wizard Past casts wonderful spells. And then there is the tenderness and piety due to those poor dead people, once strutting majestically in power, beauty, wit, or genius; and now left shivering, poor, thin, transparent ghosts in those faded, thrice-crossed paper rags! I feel rebuked for my inhuman irreverence. Out upon it! I will speak only pious words about the letters of dead folk.

But, to make up for such good feeling, let me say what I think about the letters of persons now living, in good health, my contemporaries and very liable to outlive me. For if I am to

Hortus Vitae

praise the letters which my soul loves, I must be plain also about those which my soul abhors.

And to begin with the worst. The letter we all hate most, I feel quite sure, is the nice letter of a person whom we think horrid. Some beings have the disquieting peculiarity, which crowns their other bad qualities, of being able to write more pleasingly than they speak, look, or (we suppose) act ; revealing, pen in hand, human characteristics, sometimes alas ! human charms, high principle, pathetic sentiment, poetic insight, sensitiveness to nature, things we are bound to love, but particularly do not wish to love in *them*. This villainous faculty, which puts us in a rage and forces us to be amiable, is almost enough to make us like, or at all events condone, its contrary in our own dear friends. I mean that marvellous transformation to which so many of those we love are subject ; creatures, supple, subtle and sympathetic in the flesh, in speech and glance and deed, becoming stiff, utterly impervious and heartless once they set to writing ; lovely Melusinas turning, not into snakes, but into some creature like a dried cod. This is much

Receiving Letters

worse with persons of our nation than with our foreign friends, owing to that fine contempt for composition, grammar, and punctuation which marks the well-bred Briton, and especially the well-bred Briton's wife and daughter. As a result, there is a positive satisfaction, a sense of voluminous well-being, derived from a letter which is merely explicit, consecutive, and garnished with occasional stops. This question of punctuation is a serious one. Speaking personally, I find I cannot enjoy the ineffable sense of resting in the affection and wisdom of my friend, if I am jerked breathless from noun to noun and from verb to verb, or set hunting desperately after predicates. Worse even is the lack of explicitness. The peace and trustfulness, the respite given by friendship from what Whitman calls "the terrible doubt of appearances" are incompatible with brief and casual utterance, ragbags of items, where you have to elucidate, weigh, and use your judgment whether more (or less) is meant than meets the eye; and after whose perusal you are left for hours, sometimes days, patching together suggestions and wondering what they suggest. Some persons' letters seem almost

Hortus Vitae

framed to afford a series of *alibis* for their personality ; not in this thing, oh no ! not concerned in such a matter by any means ; always elsewhere, never to be clutched.

Yet there are bitterer things in letters from friends than even these, which merely puzzle and distress, but do not infuriate. For I feel cheated by casual glimpses of affairs which concern me not ; I resent odd scraps of information, not chosen for my palate ; I am indignant at news culled from the public prints, and frantic at thermometric and meteorological intelligence. But stay ! There is a case when what seems to come under this heading is really intensely personal, and, therefore, most welcome to the letter receiver. I mean whenever, as happens with some persons, such talk about the weather reveals the real writing soul in its most intimate aspect ; wrestling with hated fogs, or prone in the dampish heat, fretted by winds or jubilant in dry, sunny air. And now I find that with this item of weather reports, I am emerging from the region of letters I abhor into the region of letters which I love, or which I lovingly grieve over for some small minor cruelty.

Receiving Letters

For I am grieved—nay, something more—by that extraordinary (and I hope exclusively feminine) fact an absence of superscripture. My soul claims some kind of vocative. I would accept a German note of exclamation ; I would content myself with an Italian abbreviation, a *Preg^{mo}*, or *Chiar^{mo}* ; I could be happy with a solemn and discreet French “*Madame et chère amie*,” or (as may happen) “*Monsieur et cher Maître*,” like the bow with tight-joined heels and *platbord* hat pressed on to waistcoat, preluding delightful conversation. But not to be quite sure how one is thought of ! Whether as *dear*, or *my dear*, or Tom, Dick, or Harry, or soldier, or sailor, or candlestick maker ! Nay, at the first glance, not quite to know whether one is the destined reader, or whether even there is a destined reader at all ; to be offered an entry out of a pocket-book, a page out of a diary, a selection of *Pensées*, were they Pascal’s ; a soliloquy, were it Hamlet’s : surely lack of sympathy can go no further, nor incapacity of effort be more flagrant than with such writers, usually the very ones the reader most clings to, who put off, as it seems, until directing

Hortus Vitae

the envelope, the question of whom they are writing to.

Yet the annoyance they give one is almost compensated when, once in a blue moon, in such a superscription-less epistle, one lights upon a sentence very exclusively directed to one's self ; when suddenly out of the vague *tenebrae* of such a letter, there comes, retreating as suddenly, a glance, a grasp, a clasp. It seems quite probable that young Endymion, in his noted love passages with the moon, may have had occasionally supreme felicity of this kind, in a relation otherwise of painfully impersonal and public nature ; when, to wit, the goddess, after shining night after night over the seas and plains and hills, occasionally shot from behind a cloud one little gleam, one arrow of light, straight on to Latmos.

But, alack ! as Miss Howe wrote to the immortal Clarissa, my paper is at an end, my crowquill worn to the stump. So I can only add as postscript to such of my dear friends as write the letters which my soul abhors, that I hope, beg, entreat they will at least write them to me often.

NEW FRIENDS AND OLD

NEW FRIENDS AND OLD

THERE is not unfrequently a spice of humiliation hidden in the rich cordial pleasure of a new friendship, and I think Emerson knew it. Without beating about the bush as he does, one might explain it, methinks, not merely as a vague sense of disloyalty towards the other friendships which are not new ; but also as a shrewd suspicion (though we hide it from ourselves) that this one also will have to grow old in its turn. And we have not yet found out how to treat any of our possessions, including our own selves, in such a way that they shall, if anything, improve. Despite our complicated civilization, so called, or perhaps on account of it, we are all of us a mere set of barbarians, who find it less trouble to provide a new, cheap, and shoddy thing than to get the full use and full

Hortus Vitae

pleasure of a finely-made and carefully-chosen old one. Those ghastly paper toilettes of the ladies in "Looking Backward" are emblematic of our modes of proceeding. We are for ever dressing and undressing our souls, if not our bodies, in rags made out of rags.

Heaven forbid that I should ever blaspheme new friendships! They are among the most necessary as well as the most delightful things we get a chance of. They do not merely exhilarate, but actually renew and add to us, more even than change of climate and season. We are (luckily for every one) such imitative creatures that every person we like much, adds a new possible form, a new pattern, to our understanding and our feeling; making us, through the pleasantness of novelty, see and feel a little as that person does. And when, instead of *liking* (which is the verb belonging rather to good acquaintance, accidental relationship as distinguished from real friendship), it is a case of *loving* (in the sense in which we really love a place, a piece of music, or even, very often, an animal), there is something more important and excellent even than this. For every creature we do really love seems to reveal a

New Friends and Old

whole side of life, by the absorbing of our attention into that creature's ways ; nay, more, the fact that what we call *loving* is in most cases a complete creation, at least a thorough interpretation of them by our fancy and our shaken-up, refreshed feelings.

A new friendship, by this unconscious imitation of the new friend's nature and habits, and by the excitement of the thing's pleasant novelty, causes us to discover new qualities in literature, art, our surroundings, ourselves. How different does the scenery look—still familiar but delightfully strange—as we drive along the valleys or scramble in the hills with the new friend ! there is a distant peak one never noticed, or a scented herb which has always grown upon those rocks, but might as well never have done so, but for the other pair of eyes which drew ours to it, or the other hand which crushing made us know its fragrance. Pages of books, seemingly stale, revive into fresh meaning ; new music is almost certain to be learned ; and a harmony, a rational sequence, something very akin to music, perceived in what had been hitherto but a portion of life's noise and confusion. The changes of style which we note in

Hortus Vitae

the case of great geniuses—Goethe and Schiller, for instance, or Ruskin after his meeting with Carlyle—are often brought about, or prepared, by the accident of a new friendship ; and, who knows ? half of the disinterested progress of the world's thought and feeling might prove, under the moral microscope, to be but a moving web of invisible friendships, forgotten, but once upon a time new, and so vivid !

The falling off from such pleasure and profit in older friendships (it is very sad, but not necessarily cynical to recognize the fact) is due in some measure to our being less frank, less ourselves, in them than in new ones. Our mutual ways of feeling and seeing are apt to produce a definite track of intellectual and affective intercourse ; and as this track deepens we find ourselves confined, nay, imprisoned in it, with little possibility of seeing, and none of escaping, as in some sunken Devonshire lane ; the very ups and downs of the friendship existing, so to speak, below the level of our real life ; disagreements and reconciliations always on one pattern. With people we have known very long, we are apt to go thus continually over the same ground, reciting the

New Friends and Old

same formulæ of thought and feeling, imitating the *ego* of former years in its relations with a *thou* quite equally obsolete ; the real personality left waiting outside for the chance stranger. It is so easy ! so safe ! We have done it so long ! There is an air of piety almost in the monotony and ceremonial ; and then, there are the other's habits of thought which might be jarred, or feelings we might hurt. . . . Meanwhile our sincere, spontaneous reality is idling elsewhere, ready to vagabond irresponsibly at the beck and call of the passing stranger. And, who knows ? while we are thus refusing to give our poor old friend the benefit of our genuine, living, changed and changing self, we may ourselves be losing the charm and profit of his or her renovated and more efficacious reality.

The retribution sometimes comes in unexpected manner. We find ourselves neglected for some new-comer, thin of stuff, to-morrow threadbare ; *we*, who are conscious all the time of a newness too well hidden, alas ! a newness utterly unsuspected by our friend, and far surpassing the newness of the new one ! Poetic justice too lamentable to dwell

Hortus Vitae

upon. But short of it, far short, our old friendships, with their safe traditions and lazy habits, are ever tending to become the intercourse of friendly ghosts.

Yet even this is well worth having, and after bringing praise to younger friendships, let me for ever feel, rather than speak (for 'tis too deep and wide for words) befitting gratitude to old ones. For there is always something puzzling in the present ; unrestful and disquieting in all novelty ; and we require, poor harassed mortals, the past and lots of it ; the safe, the done-for past, a heap of last year's leaves or of dry, scented hay (which is mere dead grass and dead meadow-flowers) to take our rest upon. There is a virtue ineffable in things known, tried, understood ; a comfort and a peacefulness, often truly Elysian, in finding one's self again in this quiet, crepuscular, downy world of old friendships—a world, as I have remarked, largely peopled with ghosts, our own and other folks' ; but ghosts whose footsteps never creak, whose touch can never startle, or whose voice stab us, and who smile a smile which has the wide, hazy warmth of setting suns or veiled October skies. Yes, whatever they may lack (through our own

New Friends and Old

fault and folly), old friendships are made up of what, when all is said and done, we need above every other thing, poor faulty, uncertain creatures that we are—I mean kindness and certain indulgence. There is more understanding in new friendships, and a closer contact of soul with soul ; but that contact may mean a jar, a bruise, or, worst of all, a sudden sense of icy chill ; and the penetrating comprehension may entail, at any moment, pained surprise and disappointment. Making new friends is not merely exploration, but conquest ; and what cruel checks to our wishes and ambitions !

Instead of which, all vanity long since put to sleep, curiosity extinct for years, insidious pleasures of self-explanation quite forgotten, there remains this massive comfort of well-known faithful and trusting kindness ; a feeling of absolute reassurance almost transcending the human, such as we get from, let us say, an excellent climate.

There remain, also, joys quite especial to old friendship, or the possibility thereof, for the reality, alas ! is rare enough. The sudden discovery, for instance, after a period of separation or a gap in intercourse, of qualities and ways

Hortus Vitae

not previously seen (perhaps not previously wanted) in the well-known soul : new notes, but with the added charm of likeness to already loved ones, deeper, more resonant, or perhaps of unsuspected high unearthly purity, in the dear voice. Absence may do it, or change of occupation ; or sudden vicissitude of fortune ; or merely the reading of a certain book (how many friends may not Tolstoi's "Resurrection" have thus revealed to one another !), or the passing of some public crisis like the Dreyfus business. What ! after these years of familiarity, we did not know each other fully ? You thought, you felt, like that on such or such a subject, dear old friend, and I never suspected it ! Nay, never knew, perhaps, that *I* must feel and think like that, and in no other way ! To find more in what one already has ; the truest adding to all wealth, the most fruitful act of production ;—that is one of the privileges of old friendships.

OTHER FRIENDSHIPS

OTHER FRIENDSHIPS

IT came home to me, during that week of grim and sordid business in the old house, feeling so solitary among the ghosts of unkind passions which seemed, like the Wardour Street ancestors, to fill the place—it came home to me what consolation there can be in the friendship of one small corner of grace or beauty. During those dreary days in Scotland, the friendliness and consolation were given me by the old kitchen garden, with its autumn flower borders, half hiding apple trees and big cabbages and rhubarbs, and the sheep-dotted hill, and the beeches sloping above its red fruit walls. I slipped away morning and evening to it as to a friend. Not as to an old one ; that would give a different aspect to the matter ; nor yet exactly a new friend, conquering or being conquered ; but rather as one turns one's thoughts, if not

Hortus Vitae

one's words, to some nameless stranger, casually met, in whom one recognizes, among the general wilderness of alien creatures, a quality, a character for which one cares.

Travelling a good deal, and nearly always alone, one has occasion to gauge the deep dreariness of human beings pure and simple, when, so to speak, the small, learnt-by-rote lessons of civilization, of kindness, graciousness, or intelligence, are not being called into play by common business or acquaintanceship. There, in the train, they sit in the elemental, native dreariness of their more practical, ungracious demand on life ; not bad in any way, oh no ; nor actively repulsive, but trite, empty, *everyday*, in the sense of what *everyday* often, alas ! really is, but certainly no day or hour or minute, in a decent universe, should ever be. And suddenly a new traveller gets in ; and, turning round, you realize that things are changed, that something from another planet, and yet something quite right and so familiar, has entered. A young man shabbily dressed in mourning, who got in at a junction in Northern France with a small girl, like him in mourning, and like him pale, a little washed-out ashy

Other Friendships

blond, and with the inexpressible moral grace which French folk sometimes have, will always remain in my memory ; while all those fellow-travellers and all the others—hundreds of them since that day—have faded from my memory, their images collapsing into each other, a grey monotony as of the rows of little houses which unfurl and furl up, and vanish, thank the Lord, into nothingness, while the express swishes past some dreadful manufacturing town. Another time, some years ago, the unknown friend was a small boy, a baby almost, jumping and rolling (a practice intolerable in any child but him) on the seat of a second-class carriage. We did not speak ; in fact my friend had barely acquired the necessary art. But I felt companioned, befriended, delivered of the world's crowded solitude.

Apart from railway trains, a similar thing may sometimes happen. And there are few of us, surely, who do not possess, somewhere in their life, friends of the highest value whom they have barely known—met with once or twice perhaps, talked with, and for some reason not met again ; but never lost sight of by heart and fancy—indeed, more often turned to, and

Hortus Vitae

perhaps more deeply trusted (as devout persons trust St. Joseph and St. Anthony of Padua, whom, after all, they scarcely know more than their own close kindred) than so many of, ostensibly, our nearest and dearest. Indeed, this is the meaning of that curious little poem of Whitman's—"Out of the rolling ocean, the crowd, came a drop gently to me"—with its Emersonian readiness to part, "now we have met, we are safe;" a very wise view of things, if our poor human weakness really wanted safety, and did not merely want "more"—indeed, like that human little boy, want "too much."

But to return to the friendships, consoling, comforting intimacies, which we can have not merely with strangers never met again, or never, meeting, spoken with; but even more satisfactorily with those beloved ones whom, from our own lack of soul, of *anima* drawing forth *anima*, we dully call inanimates. I am not speaking, of course, of the real passions with which exceptionally lovely or wonderful spots or monuments, views of distant Alps, or certain rocky southern coasts, or St. Mark's or Amiens Cathedral, great sirens among voiceless things,

Other Friendships

subjugate and draw our souls. The friendships in question are sober and deliberate, founded on reasonable recognition of some trait of dignity or grace ; and matured by conscious courtship on our part, retracing of steps day by day, and watching the friend's varying moods at noon or under low lights. During that week in the grim Scottish ancestral house, it was the kitchen-garden, as I began my saying, which comforted me. In another place, where I was ill and sorely anxious, a group of slender, whispering poplars by a mill ; and under different, but equally harassing, circumstances, the dear little Gothic church of a tiny town of Western France.

The Gothic church on its rising ground above the high-pitched roofs, and, in a measure, the church's white tame goat, which I found there one morning under a lime tree. I had been overtaken by a sudden storm, the rain-floods dashing from the gargoyle on to the rough ground of the solitary, wooded mound. In the faint light the little church, with sparse oak leaves and dock delicately carved on the granite capitals, was wonderfully grave and gentle in its utter emptiness ; and I did it all possible honour.

Hortus Vitae

There is a low granite bench or sill round the base of the beautiful sheaved columns ; a broken, disused organ-loft of coloured mediæval thorn carving ; and under two shapely little arches lie a knight, unknown, and lady in high coif. . . . I knew it all by heart, coming like that every day and sometimes twice a day ; by heart, and, so to speak, *with* my heart. The sound of the spouting gargoyles ceased ; cocks began to crow ; I went out, for the rain must have left off. . . . Not yet ; the skies were still dripping, and the plain below full of vapours. And the tame white goat, the only living creature about the church, had taken refuge under a cart stranded by a large lime tree.

I mention this particular visit to my friend the church of L——, in order to explain the precise nature of our friendship ; and to show, as I think it does, that through that law of economy which should preside over our pleasures and interests, such intimacy with a single object, simple and unobtrusive, is worth the acquaintance with a hundred and one magnificent and perfect things, if superficially seen and without loving care.

A HOTEL SITTING-ROOM

A HOTEL SITTING-ROOM

I AM calling this paper after a hotel sitting-room because some of one's most recurrent and definite trains of thought are most hopelessly obstinate about getting an intelligible name, so that I take advantage of this one having been brought to a head in a real room of the kind. The room was on a top floor in Florence ; the Cupola and Campanile and other towers in front of it above the plum-coloured roofs ; and beyond, the bluish mountains of Fiesole. Trams were puffing about in the square below, and the church bells ringing, and the crowd streaming to the promenade ; but only the unchanging and significant life of the town seemed to matter up here. I was struck with the charm of such a hotel room—the very few ornaments, greatly cherished since they were carried about ; the books for reading, not for furniture ; the bought flowers in

Hortus Vitae

common glasses ; and the consequent sense of selection, deliberateness, and personality. Good heavens, I reflected, are we mortals so cross-grained that we can thoroughly enjoy things only by contrast, and that a sort of mild starvation is needed to whet our æsthetic appetite ?

By no means. Contrast for contrast's sake is a very coarse stimulant, and required only by very joyless natures. The real explanation of the charm of the hotel room and its sparse properties and flowers must be sought, I believe, in the fact that the charm of things depends upon our power of extracting it ; and that our power in this matter, as in every other, nay, our leisure to exert it, is necessarily limited. Things, as I before remarked, do not give themselves without some wooing ; and courtship is the secret of true possession. The world outside us, as philosophers tell us, is not what our eyes, ears, and touch and taste make it appear ; nay, for aught we know, 'tis a mere chaos ; and if, out of the endless impressions with which outer objects keep pelting us, we manage to pick up and appropriate a few, setting them in a pattern of meaning and

A Hotel Sitting-Room

beauty, it is thanks to the activity of our own special little self. That is the gist of Kant's philosophy ; and, apart from Kant, it is the vague practical knowledge which experience teaches us. Hence the disappointment of all such persons as think that the beautiful and significant things of the world ought to give them delight without any trouble on their part : they think that it is the fault of a Swiss mountain, or a Titian Madonna, or a poem by Browning if it does not at once ravish their inert souls into a seventh heaven. Yet these are people who occasionally ride, or play at golf or whist, and who never expect the cards and the golf clubs to play the game by themselves, nor the very best horse to carry them to some destination without riding. Now, beautiful and interesting things also require a deal of riding, of playing with ; let us put it more courteously—of wooing.

The hotel room I have spoken of reveals the fact that we usually have far too many pleasant things about us, to be able to extract much pleasure from any of them ; while, of course, somebody else, at the other end of the world let us say, or merely in the mews to the

Hortus Vitae

back, has so very much too little as to have none at all, which is another way of diminishing possible enjoyment. There seems, moreover, to be a certain queer virtue in mere emptiness, in mere negation. We require a *margin* of *nothing* round everything that is to charm us ; round our impressions as well as round the material objects which can supply them ; for without it we lose all outline, and begin to feel vaguely choked.

Compare the pleasure of a picture tucked away in a chapel or sacristy with the plethoric weariness of a whole Louvre or National Gallery. Nay, remember the vivid delight of some fine bit of tracery round a single door or window, as in the cathedral of Dol or the house of Tristan l'Hermite at Tours ; or of one of those Ionic capitals which you sometimes find built into quite an uninteresting house in Rome (there is one almost opposite St. Angelo, and another near Tor dei Specchi, Tower of the Mirrors, delightful name !).

That question of going to see the thing, instead of seeing it drearily among ten thousand other things equally lovely—O weariness unparalleled of South Kensington or Cluny !—

A Hotel Sitting-Room

that question of the agreeable little sense of deliberate pilgrimage (pilgrimage to a small shrine perhaps in one's memory), leads me to another explanation of what I must call the "hotel room phenomenon."

I maintain that there is a zest added to one's pleasure in beautiful things by the effort and ingenuity (unless too exhausting) expended in eliminating the impressions which might detract from them. One likes the hotel room just because some of the furniture has been sent away into the passage or wheeled into corners ; one enjoys pleasant things additionally for having arranged them to advantage in one's mind. It is just the reverse with the rooms in a certain palace I sometimes have the privilege of entering, where every detail is worked—furniture, tapestries, embroideries, majolica, and flowers—into an overwhelming Wagner symphony of loveliness. There is a genuine Leonardo in one of those rooms, and truly I almost wish it were in a whitewashed lobby. And in coming out of all that perfection I sometimes feel a kind of relief on getting into the empty, uninteresting street. My thoughts, somehow, fetch a long breath . . .

Hortus Vitae

These are not the sentiments of the superfine. But then I venture to think that the dose of fineness which is, so to speak, *super* or *too much*, just turns these folks' refinement into something its reverse. People who cannot sleep because of the roseleaf in the sheets, or the pea (like the little precious princess) under the mattress, are bad sleepers, and had better do charing or climbing, or get pummelled by a masseur till they grow healthier. And if ever I had the advising of young folk with ambition to be æsthetic, I should conjure them to cultivate their sensitiveness only to good things, and atrophy it towards the inevitable bad ; or rather I should teach them to push into corners (or altogether get rid of) the irrelevant and trivial impressions which so often are bound to accompany the most delightful ones ; very much as those occupants of the hotel room had done with some of its furniture. What if an electric tram starts from the foot of Giotto's tower, or if four-and-twenty Cook's tourists invade the inn and streets of Verona ? If you cannot extract some satisfaction from the thought that there may be intelligent people even in a Cook's party, and that the ugly

A Hotel Sitting-Room

tram takes hundreds of people up Fiesole hill without martyrizing cab-horses—if you cannot do this (which still is worth doing), overlook the Cook's tourists and the tram, blot them out of your thoughts and feelings.

This question of *superfineness* versus *refinement* (which ought to mean the power of refining things through our feeling) has carried me away from the original theme of my discourse, which, under the symbol of the hotel room, was merely that we should *perhaps appreciate more if we were offered less to appreciate*. Apropos of this, I have long been struck by the case of a dear Italian friend of mine, whose keenness of perception and grip of judgment and unexpectedness of fancy is almost in inverse proportion to her knowledge of books or opportunity of travel. An invalid, cut off from much reading, and limited to monotonous to-and-fro between a town which is not a great town and a hillside village which is not a—not a great village; she is quite marvellously delightful by her power of assimilating the little she can read and observe, not merely of transmuting *it* into something personal and racy, but (what is much more

Hortus Vitae

surprising) of being modified harmoniously by its assimilation ; her rich and unexpected mind putting forth even richer and more unexpected details. Whereas think of Tom, Dick, or Harry, their natural good parts watered down with other folks' notions, their imagination worn threadbare by the friction of experience ; men who ought to be so amusing, and alas !

And now, having fulfilled my programme, as was my duty, let me return to my pleasure, which, at this moment (and whenever the opportunity presents itself) consists in falling foul of the superfine. The superfine are those who deserve (and frequently attain) the condition of that Renaissance tyrant who lived exclusively on hard-boiled eggs (without salt) for fear of poison. The superfine are those who will not eat walnuts because of the shell, and are pained that Nature should have been so coarse as to propagate oranges through pips. The superfine are But no. Let us be true to our principle of not neglecting the delightful things of this world by fixing our too easily hypnotized gaze on the things which are not delightful—disagreeable things which

A Hotel Sitting-Room

should be examined only with a view to their removal ; or if they prove obstinate fixtures in our reality, be all the more resolutely turned out of the sparsely-furnished, delectable chambers of our fancy.

IN PRAISE OF COURTSHIP

IN PRAISE OF COURTSHIP

THREE is too little courtship in the world. I do not mean there is not enough marrying and giving in marriage, or that the preliminaries thereunto are otherwise than they should be. Quite the reverse. As long as there is love and youth, there is sure in the literal sense to be courtship. But what I ask is that there be courtship besides that literal courtship between the Perditas and Florizels ; that there be "being in love" with a great many things, even stocks and stones, besides youth and maiden ; which would result, on the whole, in all of us being young in feeling even when we had grown old in years.

For courtship means a wish to stand well in the other person's eyes, and, what is more, a readiness to be pleased with the other's ways ; a sense on each side of having had the better of the bargain ; an undercurrent of surprise and thankfulness at one's good luck.

Hortus Vitae

There is not enough courtship in the world. This thought has been growing in my mind ever since the silver wedding of two dear friends : that quarter of a century has been but a prolonged courtship.

Why is it not oftener so ? One sees among married folk a good deal of affection, of kindness, even of politeness ; a great deal too much mutual dependence, degenerating, of course, into habitual boredom. But none of this can be called courtship. Perhaps this was the meaning, less cynical than supposed, but quite as sad, of La Rochefoucauld when he noted down, “Il y a de bons mariages, mais point de *délicieux* ;” since, in the delicate French sense of the word, implying some analogy of subdued yet penetrating pleasantness, as of fresh, bright weather or fine light wine, courtship is essentially *délicieux*.

This is, of course, initiating a question of manner. Modern psychology is discovering scientific reasons for the fact that if you wag a dog’s tail he feels pleased ; or, at all events, that the human being would feel pleased if it had a tail and could wag it. Confessors and nurses knew it long ago, curbing bad temper by

In Praise of Courtship

restraining its outer manifestations ; and are not dinners and plays, flags and illuminations, birthdays and jubilees—nay, art itself, devices for suggestions to mankind that it feels pleased ?

Married people, as a rule, wish not to be pleased, or at least not to show it. They may be heartbroken at each other's death, and unable to endure a temporary separation ; but the outsider may wonder why, seeing how little they seem to care for being together. It is the same, after all, with other relations ; and it is only because brothers and sisters, fathers and children have not taken visible steps to select one another that their bored indifference is less conspicuous. You will say it is a question of mere manner. But, as remarked, manner not merely results from feeling, but largely reacts on feeling, and makes it different. People who live together have the appearance, often, of taking each other, if not as a convenience, at all events as a *fait accompli*, and, so far as possible, as if not there at all. Near relations try to realize the paradox of companionable solitude ; and intimacy seems to imply the right to behave as if the intimate other one were not there. Now, *being by one's self* is a fine thing, convenient

Hortus Vitae

and salutary (indeed, like courtship, there is not enough of it); but being by one's self is not to be confounded with *not being in company*. I have selected that expression advisedly, in order to give a shock to the reader. *In company?* Good heavens! is being with one's wife, one's brothers or sisters, one's children, one's bosom friends *being in company?* And why not? Should company necessarily mean the company of strangers? And is the presence of one's nearest and dearest to be accounted as nothing—as nothing demanding some change in ourselves, and worthy of being paid some price for?

This goes against our notion of intimacy; but then our notion is wrong, as is shown daily by the quarrels and recriminations of intimate friends. One can be natural, *with a difference*, which difference means a thought for the other. There is a selection possible in one's words and actions before another—nay, there is a manner of doing and feeling which almost forestalls the necessity of a selection at all. I like the expression employed by a certain sister after nursing her small brother through a difficult illness, “We were always Castilian,” she said. Why, as we all try to be honest, and hard-

In Praise of Courtship

working, and clever, and more or less illustrious, should we not sometimes try to be a little Castilian ? Similarly, my friend of the silver wedding once pointed out to me that marriage, with its enforced and often excessive intimacies, was a wonderful school of consideration, of mutual respect, of fine courtesy. This had been no paradox in her case ; but then, as I said, her twenty-five years of wedlock had been years of courtship.

Courtship, however, should not be confined to marriage, nor even to such relations as imply close quarters and worries in common ; nay, it should exist towards all things, a constant attitude in life—at least, an attitude constantly tended towards.

The line of least resistance seems against it ; our laziness, and our wish to think well of ourselves merely because we *are* ourselves, undoubtedly go against it, as they do against everything in the world worth having. In our own day certain ways of thinking, culminating in development of the *Moi* and production of the *Uebermensch*, and general self-engrossment and curriishness, are peculiarly hostile to courtship. Whereas the old religious training, where

Hortus Vitae

it did not degenerate into excessive asceticism, was a school of good manners towards the universe as well as towards one's neighbours. The "Fioretti di San Francisco" is a handbook of polite friendliness to men, women, birds, wolves, and, what must have been most difficult, fellow-monks ; and St. Francis' Hymn to the Sun might be given as an example of the wise man's courtship of what we stupidly call inanimates.

For courtship might be our attitude towards everything which is capable of giving pleasure ; and would not many more things give us pleasure—let us say, the sun in the heavens, the water on the stones, even the fire in the grate, if, instead of thinking of them as existing merely to make our life bearable, we called them, like the saint of Assisi, My Lord the Sun, and Sister Water, and Brother Fire, and thought of them with joy and gratitude ?

Certain it is that everything in the world repays courtship ; and that, quite outside all marrying and giving in marriage, in all our dealings with all possible things, the cessation of courtship marks the incipient necessity for divorce.

KNOWING ONE'S MIND

KNOWING ONE'S MIND

THE only things which afforded me any pleasure in that great collection of Ingres drawings, let alone in that very dull, frowsy, stale, and unprofitable city of Montauban, whither I had travelled on purpose to see it, were an old printed copy of "Don Juan oder der Steinerne Gast"—in a glass case alongside of M. Ingres' century-long-uncleaned fiddle—and a half-page of Mozart's autograph, given to M. Ingres when a student by a Prix de Rome musician. I mentioned this fact to my friends, in a spirit of guileless truthfulness ; when, what was my surprise at the story being received with smiling incredulity. "Your paradox," they said, with the benevolent courtesy of their nation, for they were French, "is delightful and most *réussi*. But, of course, we know you to be exquisitely sensitive to genius in all its manifestations."

Hortus Vitae

Now, I happened to know myself to be as insensible as a stone to genius as manifested in the late M. Ingres. However, I despaired of persuading them that I was speaking the truth ; and, despite the knowledge of their language with which they graciously credited me, I hunted about in vain for the French equivalent of “I know my own mind.” Whereupon, allowing the conversation to take another turn, I fell to musing on those untranslatable words, together with the whole episode of the Mozart manuscript and the drawings of M. Ingres, including that rainy, chilly day at Montauban ; and also another day of travel, even wetter and colder, which returned to my memory.

Knowing one's own mind (in whatever way you might succeed in turning that into French) is a first step to filling one's own place instead of littering unprofitably over creation at large, and in so far also to doing one's own work. Life, I am willing to admit, is not all private garden, nor should we attempt to make it. 'Tis nine-tenths common acres, which we must till in company, and with mutual sacrifice of our whims. Nay, Life is largely public thoroughfares with a definite *rule of the road* and a

Knowing One's Mind

regulated pace of traffic ; streets, at all events, however narrow, where each must shovel snow, sprinkle water, and sweep his threshold. But respect for such common property cannot be genuine where there is not a corresponding fidelity and fondness on the part of each for his own little enclosure, his garden, and, by analogy, his neighbour's garden also. There is little good to be got from your vague, gregarious natures, liking or disliking merely because others like or dislike. There cannot be much loving-kindness, let alone love (whether for persons or things or ideas), in souls which always require company, and prefer any to none at all. And as to good work, why, it means *tête-à-tête* with what you are doing, and is incompatible with the spirit of picnics. I own to a growing suspicion of those often heroic and saintly persons who allow their neighbours —husband, father, mother, children—to saunter idly into the allotments which God has given them, trampling heedlessly the delicate seedlings, or, like holiday trippers, carving egoistic initials in growing trees not of their own planting. And one of the unnoticed, because continuous, tragedies of existence is surely such wanton or

Hortus Vitae

deliberate destruction of the individual qualities of the soul, such sacrifice of the necessary breathing and standing place which even the smallest requires ; such grudging of the needful solitude and separateness, alas ! often to those that we love the best. It seems highly probable that among all their absurd and melancholy recollections of this wasteful and slatternly earth, the denizens of the Kingdom of Heaven will look back with most astonishment and grief on the fact of having lived, before regeneration, without a room apiece.

In the Kingdom of Heaven every one will have a separate room for rest and meditation ; a cell perhaps, whitewashed, with a green shutter and a white dimity curtain in the sunshine. And the cells will, of course, be very much alike in all essentials, because most people agree about having some sort of bed, table, chair, and so forth. But some glorified souls will have the flowers (which Dante saw her plucking) of Leah ; and others the looking-glass of the contemplative Rachel ; and there will be ever so many other little differences, making it amusing and edifying to pay a call upon one's brother or sister soul.

Knowing One's Mind

In such a state of spiritual community and privacy (so different from our present hugger-mugger and five-little-bears-in-a-bed mode of existence), my soul, for instance, if your soul should honour it with a visit, would be able, methinks, to talk quite freely and pleasantly about the Ingres Museum at Montauban, and the autograph of Mozart in the glass case alongside the fiddle. . . . The manuscript is only a half sheet full score, torn or cut through its height ; and the voice part is broken off with one word only—insufficient to identify it among Mozart's Italian works, though, perhaps, most suggestive of "Don Giovanni"—the word "Guai." The manuscript is exquisitely neat, yet has none of the look of a copy, and we know that Mozart was never obliged to make any. The writing is so like the man's adorable personality, the little pattern of notes so like his music. The sight of it moved me, flooding my mind with divine things, that Concerto for Flute and Harp, for instance, which dear Mme. H—— had recently been playing for me. And during that dull, rainy day of waiting for trains at Montauban, it made me live over again another day of rainy travel, but with the

Hortus Vitae

“Zauberflöte” at the end of it, about which I will also tell you, since I am permitted to know my own mind and to speak it.

But I find I have incidentally raised the question *de gustibus*, or, as our language puts it, the *accounting for tastes*. And I must settle and put myself right in the matter of M. Ingres before proceeding any further. The Latin saying, then, “*De gustibus non est disputandum*,” contains an excellent piece of advice, since disputing about tastes or anything else is but a sorry employment. But the English version is absolutely wide of the mark, since tastes can be accounted for just as much as climate, history, and bodily complexion. Indeed, we should know implicitly what people like and dislike if we knew what they were and how they had come to be so. The very diversity in taste proves its deep-down reality: preference and antipathy being consubstantial with the soul —nay, inherent in the very mechanism and chemistry of the body. And for this reason tastes are at once so universal and uniform, and so variously marked by minor differences. There are human beings all shank and thigh and wrist, with contemplative, deep-set eyes

Knowing One's Mind

and compressed, silent lips ; and others running to rounds and segments of circles, like M. Ingres' drawings, their eyes a trifle prominent for the better understanding of others, and mouth, like the typical French one, at a forward angle, as if for ready speech. But, different as these people are, they are alike in the main features of symmetry and balance ; they haven't two sets of lungs and a duplicate stomach, like Centaurs, whom every one found so difficult to deal with ; nor do any of them end off in a single forked tail, twisting about on which accounts for the proverbial untrustworthiness of mermaids. Being alike, all human creatures require free space and breathable air ; and, being unlike, some of them hanker after the sea, and others cannot watch without longing the imitation mountains into which clouds pile themselves on dreary flat horizons. And similarly in the matter of art. We all delight in the ineffable presence of transcending power ; we all require to renew our soul's strength and keenness in the union with souls stronger and keener than ours. But the power which appeals to some of us is struggling and brooding tragically, as in Michelangelo and Beethoven ;

Hortus Vitae

while the power which straightway subdues certain others is easy, temperate, and radiant, as in Titian and Mozart. And thus it comes about that every soul—"where a soul can be discerned"—is the citizen, conscious or not, of a spiritual country, and obeys a hierarchy, bends before a sovereign genius, crowned or mitred by inscrutable right divine, never to be deposed. But there are many kingdoms and principalities, not necessarily overlapping ; and the subjects of them are by no means the same.

Take M. Ingres, for instance. He is, it seems, quite a tremendous potentate. I recognize his legitimate sway, like that of Prester John, or of the Great Mogul. Only I happen not to obey it, for I am a born subject of the King of Hearts. And who should that be but Apollo-Wolfgang-Amadeus, driving with easy wrist his teams, tandem or abreast, of winged, effulgent melodies ?

It was raining, as I told you, that morning which I spent in the Ingres Museum at Montauban. It was raining melted snow in hurricanes off the mountains that other day of travel, and I was on the top of a Tyrolese diligence. The roads were heavy ; and we

Knowing One's Mind

splashed slowly along the brink of roaring torrents and through the darkness of soaked and steaming fir woods. At the end of an hour's journey we had already lost four. "If you stop to dine," said successive jack-booted postilions, quickly fastening the traces at each relay, "you will never catch the Munich train at Garmisch. But the Herrschaften will please themselves in the matter of eating and drinking." So the Herrschaften did not please themselves at all, but splashed along through rain and sleet, through hospitable villages all painted over with scrollwork about beer, and coffee, and sugar-bakery, and all that "Restoration" which our poor drenched bodies and souls were lacking so woefully. For we had stalls at the Court Theatre of Munich, and it was the last, the very last, night of "The Magic Flute"! The Brocken journey on the diligence-top came to an end ; the train at Garmisch was caught by just two seconds ; we were safe at Munich. But I was prone on a sofa, with a despairing friend making hateful attempts to rouse me. Go to the play? Get up? Open my eyes to the light? My fingers must have fumbled some feeble "no," beyond all contradiction.

Hortus Vitae

“But your ticket—but ‘The Magic Flute’—but you have come three days’ journey on purpose!” I take it my lips achieved an inarticulate expression of abhorrence for such considerations. After that I do not exactly know what happened: my exhausted will gave way. I was combed and brushed, thrust into some manner of festive apparel, pushed into a vehicle, pulled out of it, and shoved along, by the staunch and (as it seemed) brutal arm of friendship, among crimson and gilding and blinding lights all seen at intervals through half-closed eyes. A little bell rang, and I felt it was my death knell. But through the darkness of my weltering soul (for I was presumably dead and undoubtedly damned) there marched, stood still, and curtsied majestically towards each other, the great grave opening chords of the overture. And when they had delivered, solemnly, their mysterious herald’s message and subsided, off started the little nimble notes of the fugue, hastening from all sides, meeting, crossing, dispersing, returning, telling their wonderful news of improbable adventures; multitudinous, scurrying away in orderly haste to protect the hero and heroine, and be joined

Knowing One's Mind

by other notes, all full of inexhaustible goodwill ; taking hands, dancing, laughing, and giving the assurance that all is for the best in the world of enchantment, in the world of bird-calls, and tinkling triangles and magic flutes, under the spells of the great Sun-priest and Sun-god Mozart. I opened my eyes and had no headache ; and sat in that Court Theatre for three mortal hours, in flourishing health and absolute happiness, and would have given my soul for it to begin immediately all over again.

Now, not all the drawings of M. Ingres could have done that. And the piece of torn music-paper in the glass case at Montauban had made me, for a few faint seconds, live it through again. And I know what I don't care for, and what I do.

AGAINST TALKING

AGAINST TALKING

AS towards most other things of which we have but little personal experience (foreigners, or socialists, or aristocrats, as the case may be), there is a degree of vague ill-will towards what is called *Thinking*. It is reputed to impede action, to make hay of instincts and of standards, to fritter reality into doubt ; and the career of Hamlet is frequently pointed out as a proof of its unhappy effects. But, as I hinted, one has not very often an opportunity of verifying these drawbacks of thinking, or its advantages either. And I am tempted to believe that much of the mischief thus laid at the door of that poor unknown quantity *Thinking* is really due to its ubiquitous twin-brother *Talking*.

I call them twins on the analogy of Death and Sleep, because there is something poetical and attractive in such references to family

Hortus Vitae

relations ; and also because, as many people cannot think without talking, and talking, at all events, is the supposed indication that thinking is within, there has arisen about these two human activities a good deal of that confusion and amiable not-caring-which-is-which so characteristic of our dealings with twins. But *Talking*, take my word for it, is the true villain of the couple.

Talking, however, should never be discouraged in the young. Not talking *with them* (largely reiteration of the word “Why ?”), but talking among themselves. Its beneficial effects are of the sort which ought to make us patient with the crying of infants. Talking helps growth. M. Renan, with his saintly ironical sympathy for the young and weak, knew it when he excused the symbolists and decadents of various kinds with that indulgent sentence, “*Ce sont des enfants qui s’amusent.*” It matters little what litter they leave behind, what mud pies they make and little daily dug-up gardens of philosophy, ethics, literature, and general scandal ; they will grow out of the need to make them—and meanwhile, making this sort of mess will help them grow.

Against Talking

Besides, is it nothing that they should be amusing themselves once in their lives (we cannot be sure of the future)? And what amusement, what material revelry can be compared with the great carouses of words in which the young can still indulge? We were most of us young once, odd as it appears; and some of us can remember our youthful discussions, our salad-day talks, prolonged to hours, trespassing on to subjects, which added such a fine spice of the forbidden and therefore the free! The joy of asking reasons where you have hitherto answered school queries; of extemporizing replies, magnificent, irresponsible, instead of laboriously remembering mere solutions; of describing, analyzing, and generally laying bold mental eyes, irreverent intellectual hands, on personalities whose real presence would merely make you stumble over a chair or drop a tea-cup! For talking is the great equalizer of positions, turning the humble, the painfully immature, into judges with rope and torch; and in a kindlier way allowing the totally obscure to share the life of kings, and queens, and generals, and opera-singers; which is the reason that items of Court news or of "dramatic gossip"

Hortus Vitae

are so frequently exchanged in omnibuses and at small, decent dinner-tables.

Moreover, talking has for the young the joys of personal exuberance ; it is all honeycombed, or rather, filled (like champagne) with the generous gaseousness of self-analysis, self-accusation, self-pity, self-righteousness, and autobiography. The poor mortal, in that delusive sense of sympathy and perfect understanding which comes of perfect indifference to one's neighbour's presence, has quicker pulses, higher temperature, more vigorous movements than are compatible with the sober sense of human unimportance. In conversation, clever young people—vain, kindly, selfish, ridiculous, happy young people—actually take body and weight, expand. And are you quite sure, my own dear, mature, efficient, and thoroughly productive friends and contemporaries, that it is not this expansion of youthful rubbish which makes the true movement of the centuries ? . . . Poor stuff enough, very likely, they talked, those long-haired, loose-collared Romanticists of the Hôtel Pimodan and the literary cafés recorded by Balzac, *Jeunes Frances*, or whatever their names ; and priggery, as well as blood-and-thunder, those lads round

Against Talking

the table d'hôte at Strasburg, where Jung-Stilling noticed the entrance of a certain tall, Apolline young man answering to the name of Goethe. Rubbish, of course ; but rubbish necessary, yes, every empty bubble and scum and mess thereof, for the making of a great literary period—nay, of a great man of letters. And when, nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine times, there results neither one nor the other, why, there has been the talking itself—exciting and rapturous beyond everything that literary periods and literary personalities can ever match.

'Tis with the talking of the mature and the responsible that I would pick a quarrel. Particularly if they are well read, unprejudiced, subtle of thought, and precise of language ; and most particularly if they are scrupulously just and full of human charity. For when two or three persons of this sort meet together in converse, nothing escapes destruction. The character of third persons crumbles under that delicate and patient fingering : analysis, synthesis, rehabilitation, tender appreciation, enthusiastic definition, leave behind only a horrid quivering little heap of vain virtues and atrophied bad instincts. In such conversations

Hortus Vitae

I have heard loyal and loving friends make admissions and suggestions which would hang you in a court of justice ; I can bear witness to having in all loyalty and loving-kindness done so myself a thousand times. Nor is this even the worst. For your living human being has luckily a wonderful knack of reasserting his reality ; and the hero or victim of such conversational manipulation will take your breath away by suddenly entering the room or entering into your consciousness as hale and whole as old Æson stepping out of Medea's cooking-pot. But opinions, impressions, principles, standards, possess, alas ! no such recuperative virtue ; or, rather, they cannot interrupt the discussion of themselves by putting in an appearance.

Now, silent thought, whenever it destroys, destroys only to reconstruct the universe or the atom in the thinker's image ; and new realities arise whenever a real individual creature reveals his needs and ways of feeling. But in what is called *a good serious talk* there is no such creating anew ; nobody imposes his image, no whole human creature reveals a human organism : there is merely a jumble of superposed pictures which will not become a composite photograph ;

Against Talking

and the inherent optimism or pessimism, scepticism or dogmatism, of each interlocutor merely reiterates *No* to the ways of seeing and feeling of the others. Every word, perpetually defined and redefined at random, is used by each speaker in a different sense and with quite different associations. The subject under discussion is in no one's keeping : it is banged from side to side, adjusted to the right and adjusted to the left, a fine screw put on it every now and then to send it sheer into the great void and chaos ! And almost the saddest part of the business is that the defacements and tramplings which the poor subject (who knows, perhaps very sacred to some one of us ?) is made to suffer, come not from our opponent's brutal thrusting forward of *his* meaning, but rather from our own desperate methods to hold tight, to place *our* meaning in safety, somewhere where, even if not recognized, it will at least not be mauled. . . . Such are the scuffles and scrimmages of the most temperate, intellectual conversations, leaving behind them for the moment not a twig, not a blade of the decent vegetation of the human soul. Cannot we get some great beneficent mechanic to invent

Hortus Vitae

some spiritual cement, some asphalt and gravel of nothingness, some thoroughly pneumatic intellectual balls, whereon, and also wherewith, we privileged creatures may harmlessly expend our waste dialectic energies ?

Then, would you never talk ? Or would you confine talking to the weather or the contents of the public prints ? Would you have our ideas get hard and sterile for want of being moved ? Do you advise that, like some tactful persons we—you—yes, *you*—all know and detest—we systematically let every subject drop as soon as raised ?

There ! the talking has begun. They are at it, contradicting what they agree with, and asking definitions of what they perfectly understand. Of course not ! And here I am, unable to resist, rushing into the argument, excited—who can tell ?—perhaps delighted. And by the time we take up our bedroom candles, and wish each other good night (with additional definitions over the banisters) every scrap of sensible meaning I ever had will be turned to nonsense ; and I shall feel, next morning, oh, how miserably humiliated and depressed ! . . .

“ Well—and to return to what we were saying last night . . . ”

IN PRAISE OF SILENCE

IN PRAISE OF SILENCE

ONE of the truths which come (if any do) with middle age, is the gradual recognition that in one's friendly intercourse the essential—the one thing needful—is not what people say, but what they think and feel.

Words are not necessarily companionable, far from it ; but moods truly meet, to part in violent dissonance ; or to move parallel in happy harmonic intervals ; or, more poignant and more satisfying still, to pass gradually along some great succession of alien chords—common contemplation, say, of a world grievous or pleasant to both—on towards the peace, the consummation, of a great major close. Once we have sufficient indication that another person cares for the same kind of things that we do—or, as important quite, cares in the same degree or in the same way—all further explanation becomes superfluous : detail, delightful

Hortus Vitae

occasionally to quicken and bring home the sense of companionship, but by no means needed.

This is the secret of our intercourse with those persons of whom our friends will say (or think), What *can* you have in common with So-and-so? What *can* you find to talk about? Talk about? Why, nothing; the enigmatic person remains with us, as with all the rest of the world, silent, inarticulate; incapable, sometimes, of any inner making of formulæ. But we know that our companion is seeing, feeling, the same lines of the hills and washes of their colours, the same scudding or feathering out of clouds; is *living*, in the completest sense, in that particular scene and hour; and knowing this, it matters nothing how long we trudge along the road or saunter across the grass without uttering. The road of life, too, or the paths and thickets of speculation.

And speaking of walks, I know no greater torment, among those minor ones which are the worst, than the intelligent conversation—full of suggestion and fine analysis, perhaps, and descriptions of *other* places—which reveals to

In Praise of Silence

us that the kindly speaker is indeed occupying the same geographical space or sitting behind the same horse as we are, but that his soul is miles and miles away. And the worst of it is that such false companionship can distract us from any real company with the moment and the place. We have to answer out of civility ; then to think, to get interested, and then . . . well, then it is all over. "We had such a delightful walk or drive, So-and-so and I," says our friend on returning home, "and I am so glad to find that we have such a lot of interests in common." Alas ! alas ! . . . Hazlitt was thinking of such experiences, knowing perhaps the stealthiness and duplicity which the fear of them develops in the honest but polite, when he recommended that one should take one's walks alone.

But there is something more perfect even than one's own company : the companion met once, at most twice, in a lifetime (for he is by no means necessarily your dearest and nearest, nor the person who understands you best). He or she whose words are always about the place and moment, or seem to suit it ; whose remarks, like certain music, feel restful, spacious, cool,

Hortus Vitae

airy-like silence. And here I have got back to the praise of such persons as talk little, or (what is even better) *seem* to talk little.

There is a deal of truth, and, as befits the subject, rather implied than actually expressed, in Maeterlinck's essay on Silence. His fine temper, veined and shot with colour, rich in harmonics like a well-toned voice, enables him, even like the mystics whom he has edited, to guess at those diffuse and mellow states of soul which often defy words. He knows from experience how little we can really live, although we needs must speak, in definite formulæ, logical frameworks of verb and noun, subject and predicate. Let alone the fact that all consummate feeling (like the moment to which Faust cried *Stay*) abolishes the sense of sequence—revolves, if I may say so, on its own axis, a *now, forever*; baffling thereby all speech. And M. Maeterlinck perceives, therefore, that real communion between fellow-creatures is interchange of temperament, of rhythm of life; not exchange of remarks, views, and opinions, of which ninety-nine in a hundred are merely current coin. To what he has said I should like to add that if we

In Praise of Silence

are often silent with those whom we love best, it is because we are sensitive to their whole personality, face, gesture, texture of soul and body ; that we are living with them not only in the present, but enriched, modified by all they have said before, by everything remaining in our memory as theirs. To talk would never express a state of feeling so rich and living ; and it can serve, at most, only to give the heightening certainty of presence, like a hand-clasp or asking, "Are you there ?" and getting the answer, "Yes ; I am here, and so are you"—facts of no high logical importance !

As regards silent people, this characteristic may, of course, be mere result of sloth and shyness, or lack of habit of the world, and they may be gabbling volubly in their hearts. Such as these are no kind of blessing, save perhaps negatively. Still less to be commended are those others, cutting a better figure (or thinking so), who measure their words from a dread of "giving themselves away"—of "making themselves cheap," or otherwise (always thinking in terms of money, lawsuits, and general overreaching) getting the worst of a bargain. Indeed, it is a sign how little we are truly civilized, that such

Hortus Vitae

silence or laconicism as this, can be met constantly outside the class (invariably cunning) of peasants ; indeed, among men exercising what we are pleased to call *liberal professions*.

The persons in whom silence is a mark of natural fine breeding are those who, being able to taste the real essence of things, are apt, perhaps wrongly, to despise the unessential. They are disdainful of all the old things inevitably repeated in saying half a new one. They cannot do with the lumber, wastepaper, shavings, sawdust, rubbish necessary for packing and conveying objects of value ; now most of talk, and much of life, is exactly of that indispensable useful uselessness. They are silent for the same reason that they are frequently inactive, recognizing that words and actions are so often mere litter and encumbrance. One feels frozen occasionally by their unspoken criticism ; one's small exuberances checked by lack of sympathy and indulgence ; one would like, sometimes, to pick a quarrel with them, to offer a penny for their thoughts, to force them to be as unselective and vulgar as one's self. But one desists, feeling instinctively the refreshment (as of some solitary treeless down or rocky stream) and purification

In Praise of Silence

of their fine abstention in this world where industry means cinder-heaps, and statesmanship, philosophy, art, philanthropy, mean “secondary products” of analogous kind.

Before concluding this over-garrulous tribute to silence, I would fain point out the contrast, ironical enough, between the pleasant sense of comradeship with some of those who “never utter,” and the loneliness of spirit in which we steam and post and cab through every possible realm of fact and theory with certain other people. I am not alluding to the making hay of politics, exhibitions, theatres, current literature, etc., which is so much the least interesting form of gossip. What I mean are those ample, apparently open talks between people who have found each other out ; who know the cardboard and lath and plaster of the architectural arrangements or suspect the water-supply and drainage behind ; talks where one knows that the other is shirking some practical conclusion, divagating into the abstract, and has to pick his way among hidden interests and vanities, or avert his eyes from moral vistas which he knows of. . . . “So-and-so is such a delightful talker—so witty and so wonderfully unprejudiced ; I cannot

Hortus Vitae

understand why you don't cultivate him or her." Cultivate him or her ! Cultivate garlic ; those elegant white starry flowers you wonder at my weeding out of the beds.

Compare with this the blessedness of knowing that the contents of the other person's mind are *nice*, pure of all worldliness, pretence, and meanness ; that the creature's thoughts, if opened out to one, would diffuse the scent of sunshine and lavender even as does clean, well-folded linen.

Hence the charm of a whole lot of persons not conspicuous for conversational powers : men who have lived much out-of-doors, with gun or rod ; shy country neighbours, cross old scholars, simple motherly little housewives ; and, if one get at their reality, peasants and even servants. For we have within ourselves memories and fancies ; and it depends on our companion, on a word, a glance, a gesture, that only the sweet and profitable ones, thoughts of kindness and dignity, should be stirred up.

THE BLAME OF PORTRAITS

THE BLAME OF PORTRAITS

FEELING a little bit ashamed of myself, yet relieved at having done with that particular hypocrisy, I unpinned the two facsimiles of drawings from off my study screen and put them in a portfolio. A slight sense of profanation ensued ; not so much of infidelity towards those two dear friends, nor certainly of irreverence towards Mr. Watts or the late Sir Edward Burne-Jones, but referable to the insistence with which I had clamoured for those portraits, the delight experienced at their arrival, and the solid satisfaction anticipated from their eternal possession.

We have most of us—of the sentimental ones at least—gone through some similar small drama, and been a little harrowed by it. But though we feel as if there were some sort of naughtiness in us, we are quite blameless, and on the whole rather to be pitied. We are the

Hortus Vitae

dupes of a very human craving, and one which seems modest in its demands. What ! a mere square of painted canvas, a few pencil scratchings, a bare mechanical photograph, something no rarer than a reflection in a mirror ! That is all we ask for, to still the welling-up wistfulness, the clinging reluctance, to console for parting or the thought, almost, of death ! We do not guess that this humble desire for a likeness is one of our most signal cravings after the impossible : an attempt to overcome space and baffle time ; to imprison and use at pleasure the most fleeting, intangible, and uncommunicable of all mysterious essences, a human personality.

“ Often enough I think I have got the turn of her head and neck ; but not the face—never the face that speaks,” complains the poor bereaved husband in Mary Robinson’s beautiful little poem. The case may not be tragic like that one, and yet thoroughly tantalizing ; we feel the absent ones opposite to us in the room, we are in that distant room ourselves ; there is a sense of their position, of the space they occupy, and thus we see, as through a ghost, the familiar outline, perhaps, of a chair. Or, again, there is the well-known movement,

The Blame of Portraits

accompanied, perhaps, by the tone of voice, concentrated almost to the longed-for look, and, as the figures advances . . . nothing ! Like Virgil's Orpheus, our fancy embraces a shadow. "The face—never the face that speaks !" But we *will* have it, people exclaimed, all those ages ago, and exclaim ever since. And thus they came by the notion of portraits.

And when they got them they grumbled. The cavilling at every newly-painted likeness is notorious. The sitter, indeed, is sometimes easy enough to please, poor human creatures enjoying, as a rule, any notice (however professional) of their existence, let alone an answer to the attractive riddle of *what they look like*. And there are, of course, certain superfine persons who, in the case of a famous artist, think very like the sitter, and are satisfied so long as they get an ornamental picture, or one well up to date. But the truly human grumble, and are more than justified in doing so. Their cravings have been disappointed ; they had expected the impossible, and have not got it.

Since, in the very nature of things, a picture, and particularly a fine picture, is always an imperfect likeness. For the image of the sitter on the

Hortus Vitae

artist's retina is passed on its way to the canvas through a mind chock full of other images ; and is transferred—heaven knows how changed already—by processes of line and curve, of blots of colour, and juxtaposition of light and shade, belonging not merely to the artist himself, but to the artist's whole school. Regarding merely the latter question, we all know that the old Venetians painted people ample, romantic, magnificent ; and the old Tuscans painted them narrow, lucid, and commonplace ; men of velvet and silk and armour on the one hand, and men of broadcloth and leather, on the other. The difference due to the individual artist is even greater ; and, in truth, a portrait gives the sitter's temperament merged in the temperament of the painter.

So, as a rule, portraiture does but defeat its own end. And, stoically speaking, does it much matter ? Posterity has done just as well without the transmission of the real Cardinal Hippolytus ; and we know that everything always comes right if only we look at it, Spinoza-like, “under the category of the eternal.” But we, meanwhile, are not eternal, nor, alas ! are our friends ; and that is just one

The Blame of Portraits

of the things which gall us. We cannot believe —how could we?—that the future can have its own witty men and gracious women, its own sufficient objects of love and reverence, even as we have. We feel we *must* hand on our own great and beloved ones; we *must* preserve the evanescent personal fragrance, press the flower. And hence, again, portraits and memoirs, Boswell's "Johnson," or Renan's "Ma Sœur Henriette"; grotesque or lovely things, as the case may be, and always pathetic, which tell us that men have always admired and always loved; leaving us to explain, by substituting the image of our own idols, why in that case more specially they did so. Poor people! We do so cling to our particular self and self's preferences; we are so confidently material and literal! And one dreads to think of the cruel self-defence of posterity, when we shall try to push into its notice with phonograph and cinematograph.

Let us, in the presence of such hideous machinery, cease to be literal in matters of sentiment, even at the price of a little sadness and cynicism in recognizing the unreality of everything save our own moods and fancies. Perhaps I feel more strongly on this subject

Hortus Vitae

because I happen to have seen with my own eyes the *reductio ad absurdum*—to absurdity how lamentable and dreadful!—of this same human craving for literal preservation of that which should not, cannot, be preserved. It was in the lumber-room of an Italian palace; a life-size doll, with wig of real—perhaps personally real—hair, and dressed from head to foot in the garments of the real poor lady, dead some seventy years ago. I wrote a little tale about it; but the main facts were true, and far surpassed the power of invention. In this case the husband, who had ordered this simulacrum for his solace, taking his daily dose of sentiment in its presence, proceeded, after an interval, to woo and marry his own laundress; and I think, on the whole, this was the least harrowing possible solution. Fancy if he had not found that form of consolation, but had continued trying to be faithful to that dreadful material presence, more rigid, lifeless, meaningless, with every day and every year of familiarity!

In a small way, we all of us commit that man's mistake of thinking that the life of our dear ones is in an image, instead of in the heart-beats which the image—like a name, a place, any

The Blame of Portraits

associated thing—can produce in ourselves. And only changing things can answer to our changing self; only living creatures live with us. Once learned by heart, the portrait, be it never so speaking, ceases to speak, or we to listen to its selfsame message. What was once company to us, because it awakened a flickering feeling of wished-for presence, becomes, after a time, mere canvas or paper; disintegrates into mere colours or mere black and white. Even the faithfulest among us are utterly faithless to the best-beloved portraits. We have them on our walls or on our writing-tables, and pack and unpack some of them for every journey. But do we look at them? or, looking, do we see them, feel them?

They are not, however, useless; very far from it. You might as well complain of the uselessness of the fire which is burned out, or the extinguished lamp. They have, though for a brief time, pleased, perhaps even consoled, us—warmed our heart with the sense of a loving nearness, shed a light on the visions in our mind. Hence we should cherish them as useful delusions, or rather realities, so long as they awaken a reality of feeling. And 'tis a

Hortus Vitae

decent instinct of gratitude, not mere inertness, which causes us to keep them, honoured pensioners of our affections, in honourable places.

Only one thing we should guard against, and act firmly about, despite all sentimental scruples. During the *period of activity* of a portrait—I mean while we still, more or less, look at it—we must beware lest it take, in our memory, the place of the original. Those unchanging features have the insistence of their definiteness and permanence, and may insidiously extrude, exclude, the fleeting, vacillating outlines of the remembered reality. And those alone concern our heart, and have a right to occupy our fancy. One feels aghast sometimes, on meeting some dear friend after an interval of absence, to find that those real features, that real expression, are not the familiar ones. It is the portrait, the envious counterfeit presentment, which (knowing its poor brief reign) has played us and our friend that mean trick. When this happens we must be merciless, like the fairy-story prince when the wicked creatures in the wood spoke to him in the voice of his mother ; piety towards the original arms us with ruthlessness towards the

The Blame of Portraits

portrait. It was for this same reason that, as I have said, I unpinned from my screen those two facsimiles of drawings, feeling rather a brute while I was doing so.

SERE AND YELLOW

SERE AND YELLOW

INTERLUDE

“**A**LORS que je me croyais aux derniers jours de l’automne, dans un jardin dépouillé.” The words are Madame de Hauterive’s, one of the most charming among eighteenth-century letter-writers ; but one of whom, for all the indiscretion of that age, we know little or nothing : a delicate, austere outline merely, a reserved and sensitive ghost shrinking into the dimness. She wrote those words when already an old woman, and long after death had taken her father and her daughter and most of her nearest and dearest, to the young Abbé de Carladès, who proved himself (one hopes) not utterly unworthy of that “unexpected late flowering of the soul.” The phrase is eighteenth century, and it may be the feeling itself is of as bygone a fashion. Or does this seem the case because such delicate

Hortus Vitae

souls can become known to us only when they and their loves and friendships have ceased to be more than a handful of faded paper, fingered very piously, for heaven's sake ?

However this may be, that phrase of Madame de Hauterive's contains a truth which is undying, and which, though unobtrusive, can be observed by those who have a discreet eye for the soul's affairs. Nay, one might say that the knowledge of how many times life can begin afresh, the knowledge of the new modes of happiness which may succeed each other, even when the leaves float down yellow in the still air, and the dews on the renovated grass are white like frost, is one of the blessed secrets into which the passing seasons initiate those who have honourably cultivated the garden of life, and life's wide common acres.

Indeed, such faith in the heart's renewed fruitfulness is itself among the autumn blossomings, the hidden compensations. Young folk, and those who never outgrow youth's headlong and blind self-seeking, cannot conceive such truths. For youth has no experience of change ; and what it calls the Future is but the present longing or present dread projected

Sere and Yellow

forward. Hence youth lacks the resignation which comes of knowing that our aims, our loves, ourselves, will alter ; and that we shall not eternally regret what we could not eternally covet. Hence, also, the fine despair and frequent suicide of youthful heroes and heroines. Poor young Werther, in his sky-blue *Frack* and striped yellow waistcoat, cannot believe that the time will come when he will tune the spinet of some other Charlotte—nay, follow in the footsteps of the enlightened minister, his patron ; bury himself in protocols and look forward to a diplomatic game of whist rather than to a country dance with meeting hands and eyes. And it is mere waste of breath to sermon him on the subject : lend him the pistols, and hope that (as in the humaner version of the opera) he will not use them. As to certain other fore-stallings of experience, they would be positively indecent and barbarous ! You would die of shame if the young widow happened to overhear you saying (what is heaven's truth, and a most consoling one) that her baby, which now represents only so much time and love she might have given, all, all, to *him* alone, is the only good thing which that worthless dead

Hortus Vitae

husband could ever have furnished her. And as to hinting in her presence that she will some day be much, much happier with dear Quixotic Dobbin than with that coxcomb of an Osborne, why the bare thought of such indecorum makes us feel like sinking into the ground ! We must be sympathizing, and a little short of truthful, with poor distressed young people ; above all, never seek to lighten their disappointments with visions of brisk octogenarians, one foot in the grave, enjoying a rubber !

And this, no doubt, is a providential arrangement—I mean this youthful incapacity of grasping the consolations brought by Time. For, after all, life, being there, has to be lived ; and maybe life would be lived in a half-hearted fashion did we suspect its many compensations, including what may, methinks, be the last, most solemn one. Should we jump hastily out of bed and bestir ourselves with the zest of the new day, if we thoroughly realized what is, however, matter of common experience, to wit : that at the day's close, sleep, rest without dreams or thought of awaking, may be as welcome as all this pleasant bustle of the morning ? The knowledge of these mysteries, initiation into

Sere and Yellow

which comes late and silently, is, as I hinted, perhaps the final compensation ; allowing us to face the order of things without superfine cavillings. But there are earlier, less awful and secret compensations, and these it is as well to know about, and to prepare our soul serenely to enjoy when the moment comes.

Of this kind are, of course, those autumn flowerings of sentiment alluded to in Madame de Hauteville's letter. They are blossomings sometimes sweeter than those of summer, thanks to the very scorching of summer's suns ; or else touched with an austere vividness by the first frosts, like the late china roses, which are streaked, where they open, with a vermillion unparalleled in their earlier sisters. Compare with this all that is implied in Swinburne's line, "the month of the long decline of roses." Think of those roses (I have before my eyes a Florentine terrace at the end of May) crowding each other out, blowing, withering, and dropping; roses white, red, pale lemon, and, alas ! also brown and black with mildew, living and dying in such riotous excess that you have neither time nor inclination to pluck one of them, and keep it, piously in water, before you on your table.

Hortus Vitae

Mind, I do not say that such profusion is not all right and necessary in its season. The economy of Nature is often wasteful. There might be no roses at all next year if we depended for seed and slips upon those frost-bitten flowers with their fine austerity. And in the same way that, despite the pathetic tenderness of long-deferred father or motherhood, it is better for the race that infants be brought into the world plentiful, helter-skelter, and that only the toughest stay there ; so, methinks, it may be needful that youth be full of false starts, mistaken vocations, lapsed engagements, fanciful friendships broken off in quarrel, glowing passions ending in ashes ; nay, that this period, fertile in good and evil, be crowned by marriages such as are said to be made in heaven, no doubt because the great match-making spirit of life pursues ends unguessed by human wisdom, which would often remain in single blessedness, and found homes for sickly infants. Wedlock, in other words, and, for the matter of that, father and motherhood, and most of the serious business of the universe, should not be looked upon as a compensation or consolation, but rather as something for which poor human

Sere and Yellow

creatures require to be consoled and compensated.

Having admitted which, and even suggested that marriages are fittest at the age of Daphnis and Chloe, or even of Amelia and George Osborne, let us, I pray you, glance with reverent eyes, and a smile not mocking but tender, at certain other weddings which furtively cross our path. Weddings between elderly persons, hitherto unable to make up their mind, or having, perchance, made it up all wrong on a first occasion ; inveterate old maids and bachelors, or widowers who thought to mourn for ever ; people who have found their heart perhaps a little late in the day ; but, who knows ? shrivelled as it is, perhaps, but the mellower, and of more enduring, more essential sweetness.

Alongside of such tardy nuptials there is a corresponding class of *marriages of true minds*. Genuine ones are exceedingly rare during youth ; and the impediments, despite the opinion of Shakespeare, are of the nature of nullity, ending most often in unseemly divorce between Hermia and Helena, or the Kings of Sicilia and Bohemia, one of whom, if you remember, tried to poison

Hortus Vitae

the other on very small provocation. The last-named is an instructive example of the hollowness of nursery or playground friendship, or rather of what passes for such. Genuine friendship is an addition to our real self, a revelation of new possibilities; and young people, busily absorbing the traditions of the past and the fashions of the day, have very rarely got a real self to reveal or to bestow. So that the feeling we experience in later life towards our playmates is, in fact, rather a wistful pleasure in the thought of our own past than any real satisfaction in their present selves.

Be this as it may, there is among the compensations of life, a kind of friendship which, by its very nature, requires that one of the friends have passed the *middle of the way*. I am not referring to the joys of grandfather and grandmotherhood, and all that "*art d'être grandpère*" which have been written and sung until one turns a trifle sceptical about them. What I allude to has, on the contrary, escaped (almost entirely, I think) the desecrating pen of the analytical or moralizing novelist, and remains one of the half-veiled mysteries of human good fortune, before which the observer

Sere and Yellow

passes quickly in shy admiration. The case is this : one of the parents has been unwilling, or disappointed ; marriage has meant emptiness, or worse ; and a nursery full of children has been, very likely, a mere occasion for ill-will and painful struggle. The poor soul has been, perhaps for years, fretted and wearied ; or else woefully lonely, cabined, confined, and cramped almost to numbness. When, behold ! by the marvellous miracle of man or womanhood—a dull, tiresome child is suddenly transformed, takes on shapeliness and stature, opens the bolted doors of life, leads the father or mother into valleys of ease and on to hopeful hilltops ; slays dragons, chains ogres, and smiles with the eyes and lips which have been vaguely dreamed of, longed for, who knows how long !

So children do occasionally constitute compensations and blessings not merely in disguise. And this particularly where they have not been looked upon as investments for future happiness or arrangements for paying off parental debts to society, to glory, or the Supreme Being. For surely, if children are ever to renovate the flagging life of parents, it can only be by their leaving off their childhood and coming back as

Hortus Vitae

equals, brothers, sisters, sometimes as tenderest and most admiring of chivalrous lovers.

'Tis, in fact, unexpected new life adding itself to ours which constitutes the supreme compensation in middle age ; and our heart puts forth fresh blossoms of happiness (of genius sometimes, as in the case of Goethe) because younger shoots are rejoicing in the seasonable sunshine or dews. The interests and beliefs of the younger generation prevent our own from dying ; nay, the friendships and loves of our children, whether according to the flesh or the spirit, may become our own. Daughters-in-law are not invariably made to dine off the poisoned half of a partridge, as in works of history. Some stepfathers and stepmothers feel towards those alien youths and maidens only as that dear Valentine Visconti did towards the little Dunois, whom she took in her arms, say the chronicles, and, with many kisses on eyes and cheeks, exclaimed, "Surely thou wast stolen from me !" And, in another relationship which is spoken ill of by those unworthy of it, we can sometimes watch a thing which is among reality's best poetry : where a mother, wisely and dutifully stepping aside from her married

Sere and Yellow

daughter's path, has been snatched back, borne in triumph, not by one loving pair of arms, but two ; and where the happy young wife has smiled at recognizing that in her husband's love for her there was mixed up a head-over-ears devotion for her mother.

Some folks have no sons or daughters, or husbands or wives, and hence no stepchildren or children-in-law. Yet even for them autumn may blossom. There are the children of friends, recalling their youth or compensating for their youth's failure ; and for some there are the younger workers in the same field, giving us interest in books or pictures, or journeys or campaigns, when our own days for work and struggle are over ; even as we, perhaps, have kept open the vistas of life, given Pisgah-sights to those beloved and venerated ones whose sympathy we value and understand better perhaps now than all those many, many years ago. Yes ! even in our youthful egoism we gave them something, to those dear long dead friends ; and this knowledge is itself a tiny autumn bud in our soul.

There are humbler compensations also. And among these the kind which, years after writing

Hortus Vitae

the immortal idyll of “Dr. Antonio,” my dear venerated friend Ruffini set forth in a tiny story, perhaps partly his own, about the modest but very real happiness which the mere relationship of master and servant can bring into a solitary life ; the story taking its name, by a coincidence by no means indifferent to me, from a faithful and pleasant person called Carlino.

But an end to digressions, for it is time to cease writing, particularly of such intangible and shy matters. So, to return to Madame de Hauterive’s sentence, which was our starting-point in this inventory of compensations and consolations. Paradoxical though it seem, the understanding and union brought by a glance, by words said in a given way, by any of the trifles bearing mysterious, unreasoned significance for the experienced soul—or, briefly, “*friendship at first sight*”—is as natural in the sere and yellow, as love at first sight in the salad, days. Only, to be sure, less manifest to indifferent bystanders, since one of the consoling habits which life brings with it is a respect for life’s thoroughfares, a reluctance to stop the way, collect a crowd with our private interests, and a pious reserve about such good

Sere and Yellow

fortune as is good precisely because it suits us, not other people.

Reserve of this sort, as I began with saying, is one of the charms of dear Madame de Hauterive; and the more so that eighteenth-century folk, particularly French, were not much given to it! And thus it happens that we know little or nothing about that friendship which consoled her later life; and must look round us in our own, if we would understand what were those new flowerings which had arisen, when, as she says, she had thought herself already in the last days of autumn and in a leafless garden.

A STAGE JEWEL

A STAGE JEWEL

"IT doesn't seem to be precisely what is meant by *old paste*," she answered, repeating the expression I had just made use of, while she handed me the diamond hoop across the table. "It's too like real stones, you know. I think it must be a stage jewel."

As I fastened the brooch again in my dress, I was aware of a sudden little change in my feelings. I was no longer pleased. Not that I had hoped my diamonds might prove real ; you cannot buy real diamonds, even in imagination, for four francs, which was the precise sum I had expended on these, and there were seven of them, all uncommonly large. Nor can I say that the words "*old paste*" had possessed, on my lips, any plain or positive meaning. But *stage jewel*, somehow . . . My moral temperature had altered : I was dreadfully conscious that I was no longer pleased. Now, I had been, and to an absurd degree.

Hortus Vitae

Perhaps because it was Christmas Eve, when I suddenly found myself inside that curiosity shop, pricing the diamonds, and not without an emotion of guilty extravagance, and of the difficulty of not buying if the price proved too high. . . . As is always the case with me at that season, my soul was irradiated with a vague sense of festivity, perhaps with the lights of rows of long-extinguished Christmas trees in the fog of many years, like the lights of the shops caught up and diffused in the moist twilight. I had felt an inner call for a Christmas present ; and, so far, nobody had given me one. So I had paid the money and driven back into the dark, soughing country with the diamond hoop loose in my pocket. I had felt so very pleased. . . . And now those two cursed words “stage jewel” had come and spoilt it all.

For the first time I felt it was very, very hard that my box should have been broken open last autumn and all my valuables, my Real (the word became colossal), not *stage*, jewels stolen. It was brought home to me for the first time that the man who did it must have been very, very wicked ; and that codes of law, police and even prisons could afford satisfaction to my

A Stage Jewel

feelings. Since, oddly enough, I had really not minded much at the time, nor let my pleasure in that wonderful old castle, where I had just arrived with the violated trunk, be in the least diminished by the circumstance. Indeed, such is the subtle, sophistic power of self-conceit, that the pleasure of finding, or thinking I found, that I did not mind the loss of those things had really, I believe, prevented me minding it. Though, of course, every now and then I had wished I might see again the little old-fashioned fleur-de-lysed star which had been my mother's (my heart smote me for not feeling sufficiently how much *she* would have suffered at my losing it). And I remembered how much I had liked to play with those opals of the Queen of Hearts, which seemed the essence of pale-blue winter days with a little red flame of sunset in the midst ; or, rather, like tiny lunar worlds, mysterious shining lakes and burning volcanoes in their heart. Of course, I had not been indifferent : that would have taken away all charm from the serenity with which I had enjoyed my loss. But I had been serene, delightfully serene. And now ! . . .

There was something vaguely vulgar, odious,

Hortus Vitae

unpardonable about false stones. I had always maintained there was not, but the stage jewel made me feel it. Mankind has sound instincts, rooting in untold depths of fitness ; and superfine persons, setting themselves against them, reveal their superficiality, their lack of normal intuition and sound judgment, while fancying themselves superior. And mankind (save among barbarous Byzantine and Lombard kings, who encrusted their iron crowns impartially with balas rubies, antique cameos, and bottle glass)—mankind has always shown an instinct against sham jewels and their wearers. Is is an unreasoned manifestation of the belief in truth as the supreme necessity for individuals and races, without which, as we know, there would be an end of commerce, the administration of justice, government, even family life (for birds, who have no such sense, are proverbially ignorant of their father), and everything which we call civilization. Real precious stones were perhaps created by Nature, and sham stones allowed to be created by man, as one of those moral symbols in which the universe abounds : a mysterious object-lesson of the difference between truth and falsehood.

A Stage Jewel

Real diamonds and rubies, I believe, require quite a different degree of heat to melt them than mere glass or paste ; and you can amuse yourself, if you like, by throwing them in the fire. In the Middle Ages rubies, but only real ones, were sovereign remedies for various diseases, among others the one which carried off Lorenzo the Magnificent ; and in the seventeenth century it was currently reported that the minions of the Duke of Orleans had required pounded diamonds to poison poor Madame Henriette in that glass of chicory water. And as to pearls, real ones go yellow if unworn for a few months, and have to be sunk fathoms deep in the sea, in safes with chains and anchors, and detectives sitting day and night upon the beach, and sentries in sentry-boxes ; none of which occurs with imitations. Likewise you stamp on a real pearl, while you must be quite careful not to crush a sham one. All these are obvious differences revealing the nobility of the real thing, though not necessarily adding to its charm. But, then, there is the undoubted greater beauty, the wonderful *je ne sais quoi*, the depth of colour, purity of substance, effulgence of fire, of real

Hortus Vitae

gems, which we all recognize, although it is usual to have them tested by an expert before buying. And, when all is said and done, there is the difference in intrinsic value. And you need not imagine that value is a figment. Political economy affords us two different standards of value, the Marxian and the Orthodox. So you cannot escape from believing in it. A thing is valuable either (*a*) according to the amount of labour it embodies, or (*b*) according to the amount of goods or money you can obtain in exchange for it. Now, only let your mind dwell upon the value (*a*) embodied in a pearl or diamond. The pearl fisher, who doubtless frequently gets drowned ; let alone the oyster, which has to have a horrid mortal illness, neither of which happens to the mean-spirited artificer of Roman pearls ; or the diamond seeker, seeking through deserts for months ; the fine diamond merchant, dying in caravans, of the past ; and, finally, the diamond-cutter, grinding that adamant for weeks far, far more indefatigably than to make the optic lenses which reveal hidden planets and galaxies. All that labour, danger, that weary, weary time embodied in a thing so tiny

A Stage Jewel

that, like Queen Mab, it can sit on an alderman's forefinger ! What could be more deeply satisfactory to think upon ? And as to value (*b*) (the value in *Exchange* of Mill, Fawcett, Marshall, Say, Bastiat, Gide), just think what you could buy by selling a largish diamond, supposing you had one ! And what unlikely prices (fabulous, even monstrous) are said to have been given, before and after dubious Madame de la Motte priced that great typical one, for diamond necklaces by queens and heroines of every degree !

Precious stones, therefore, are heaven-ordained symbols of what mankind values most highly—power over other folks' labour, time, life, happiness, and honour. And that, no doubt, is the reason that when the irreproachable turn-out and perfect manners of pickpockets allow them to mix freely in our select little gatherings, it is legitimate for a lady to deck herself with artificial pearls and diamonds only to the exact extent that she has real ones safely deposited at the bank. Let her look younger and sound honester than perhaps answers to the precise reality ; there is no deception in all that. But think of the

Hortus Vitae

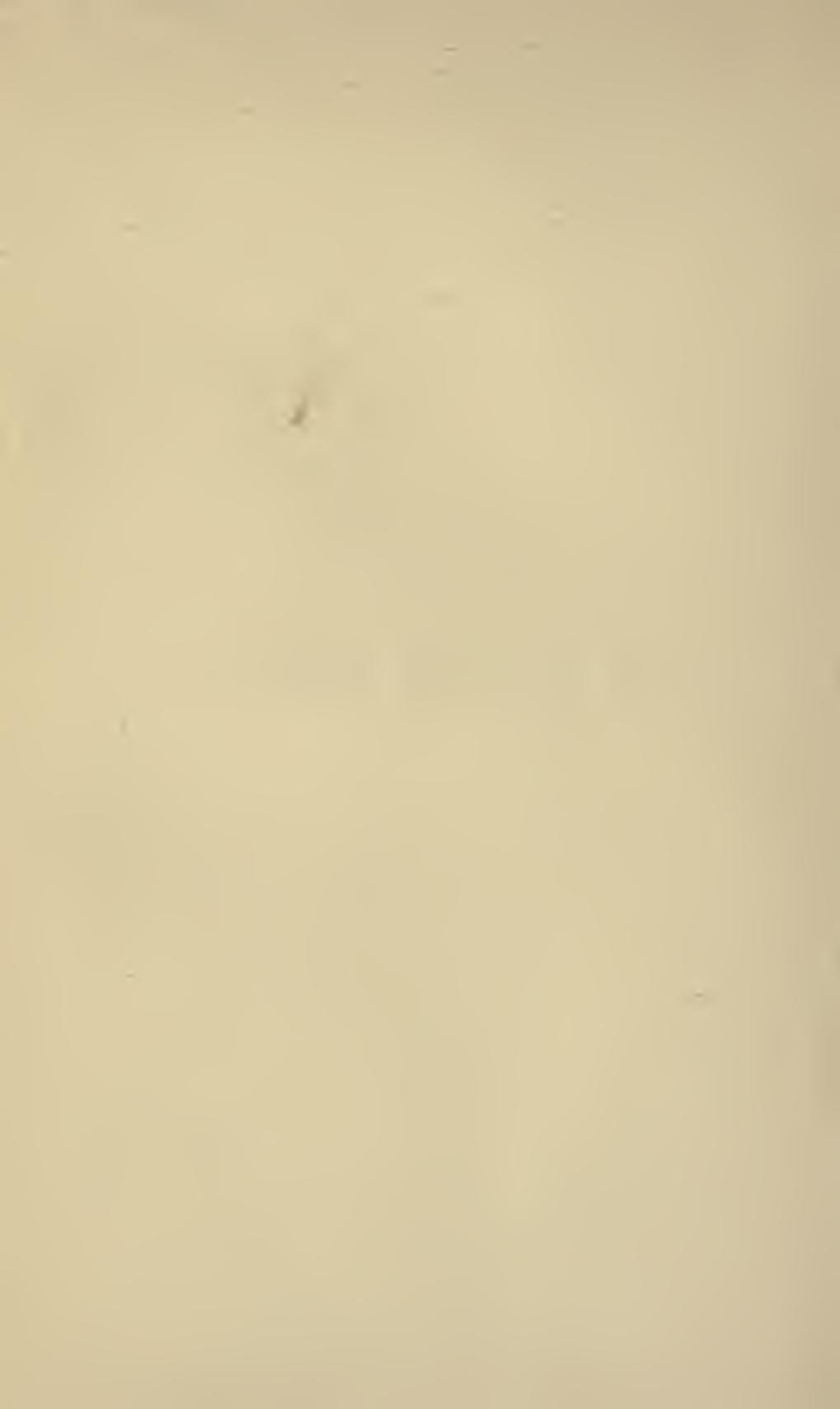
dishonourableness of misleading other folk about one's income. . . .

My soul was chastened by the seriousness of these reflections and by the recognition of the moral difference between real stones and sham ones, and I was in a very bad humour. Suddenly there came faint sounds of guitars and a mandolin, and I remembered that the servants were giving a ball at the other end of the house, and that it was Christmas Eve. I rose from my table and opened the window, letting in the music with the pure icy air. The night had become quite clear ; and in its wintry blue the big stars sparkled in a cluster between the branches of my pine tree. They made me think of the circlet which Tintoret's Venus swoops down with over the head of the ruddy Bacchus and rose-white Ariadne. Those, also, I said to myself ill-humouredly, were probably stage jewels. . . . I cannot account for the sudden train of associations this word evoked : sweeping, magnificent gestures, star-like eyes, and a goddess' brows shining through innumerable years ; a bar or two of melodious *ritornello* ; an ineffable sense of poetry and grandeur, and—but I am not

A Stage Jewel

sure—a note or two of a distant, distant voice. Could it be Malibran—or Catalani . . . and was my stage jewel bewitched, a kind of Solomon's ring, conjuring up great spirits? All I can say is that I have rarely spent a Christmas Eve like that one, while the servants' ball was going on at the other end of the house, furbishing my imitation diamonds with a silk handkerchief, alone, or perhaps not alone, in my study.

MY BICYCLE AND I



MY BICYCLE AND I

WE two were sitting together on the wintry Campagna grass ; the rest of the party, with their proud, tiresome horses, had disappeared beyond the pale green undulations ; their carriage had stayed at that castellated bridge of the Anio. The great moist Roman sky, with its song of invisible larks, arched all round ; above the rejuvenated turf rustled last year's silvery hemlocks. The world seemed very large, significant, and delightful ; and we had it all to ourselves, as we sat there side by side, my bicycle and I.

'Tis conceited, perhaps, to imagine myself an item in the musings of my silent companion, though I would fain be a pleasant one. But this much is certain, that, among general praising of life and of things, my own thoughts fell to framing the praises of bicycles. They were deeply felt, and as such not without

Hortus Vitae

appearance of paradox. What an excellent thing, I reflected, it is that a bicycle is satisfied to be quiet, and is not in the way when one is off it! Now, my friends out there, on their great horses, as Herbert of Cherbury calls them, are undoubtedly enjoying many and various pleasures; but they miss this pleasure of resting quietly on the grass with their steeds sitting calmly beside them. They are busy riding, moreover, and have to watch, to curb or humour the fancies of their beasts, instead of indulging their own fancy; let alone the necessity of keeping up a certain prestige. They are, in reality, domineered over by these horses, and these horses' standard of living, as fortunate people are dominated by their servants, their clothes, and their family connections; much as Merovingian kings, we were taught in our "*Cours de Dictées*," were dominated by the mayors of the palace. Instead of which, bar accidents (and the malignity of bottle-glass and shoe-nails), I am free, and am helped to ever greater freedom by my bicycle.

These thoughts came to me while sitting there on the grass slopes, rather than while

My Bicycle and I

speeding along the solitary road which snakes across them to the mountains, because the great gift of the bicycle consists to my mind in something apart from mere rapid locomotion ; so much so, indeed, that those persons forego it, who scorch along for mere exercise, or to get from place to place, or to read the record of miles on their cyclometer. There is an unlucky tendency — like the tendency to litter on the part of inanimates and to dulness on that of our fellow-creatures — to allow every new invention to add to life's complications, and every new power to increase life's hustling ; so that, unless we can dominate the mischief, we are really the worse off instead of the better. It is so much easier, apparently, to repeat the spell (once the magician has spoken it) which causes the broomstick to fetch water from the well, as in Goethe's ballad, than to remember, or know, the potent word which will put a stop to his floodings ; that, indeed, seems reserved to the master wizard ; while the tiros of life's magic, puffed up with half-science, do not drink, but drown. In this way bicycling has added, methinks, an item to the hurry and breathlessness of existence, and to the difficulty

Hortus Vitae

of enjoying the passing hour—nay, the passing landscape. I have only once travelled on a bicycle, and, despite pleasant incidents and excellent company, I think it was a mistake ; there was an inn to reach, a train to catch, a meal to secure, darkness to race against. And an order was issued, “Always make as much pace as you can at the beginning, because there may be some loss of time later on,” which was insult and ingratitude to those mountain sides and valleys of Subiaco and Tivoli, and to the ghosts of St. Benedict, of Nero, and of the delightful beribboned Sibyl, who beckoned us to rest in their company.

How different from this when one fares forth, companioned by one of the same mind ; or, better still, with one’s own honourable self, exploring the unknown, revisiting the already loved, with some sort of resting-place to return to, and the knowledge of time pleasantly effaced ! One speeds along the straight road, flying into the beckoning horizon, conscious only of mountain lines or stacked cloud masses ; living, for the instant, in air, space become fluid and breathable, earth a mere detail ; and then, at the turn, slackening earth’s power asserting itself with the road’s

My Bicycle and I

windings. Curiosity keenly on edge, or memory awakened ; and the past also casting its spells, with the isolated farms or the paved French villages by the river-bank, or the church spire, the towers, in the distance. . . . A wrong turn is no hardship ; it merely gives additional knowledge of the country, a further detail of the characteristic lie of the land, a different view of some hill or some group of buildings. Indeed, I often deliberately deflect, try road and lane merely to return again, and have bicycled sometimes half an hour round a church to watch its transepts and choir fold and unfold, its towers change place, and its outline of high roof and gargoyles alter on the landscape. Then the joy, spiced with the sense of reluctance, of returning on one's steps, sometimes on the same day, or on successive days, to see the same house, to linger under the same poplars by the river. Those poplars I am thinking of are alongside a stately old French mill, built, towered, and gabled, of fine grey stone ; and the image of them brings up in my mind, with the draught and foam of the weir and the glassiness of the backwater, and the whirr of the horse-ferry's ropes, that some of the most

Hortus Vitae

delightful moments which one's bicycle can give, are those when the bicycle is resting against a boat's side (once also in Exmouth harbour) ; or chained to an old lych-gate ; or, as I remarked about my Campagna ride, taking its rest also and indulging its musings.

I have alluded to the variety and alteration of pace which we can, and should, get while bicycling. Skimming rapidly over certain portions of the road—sordid suburbs, for instance—and precipitating our course to the points where we slacken and linger, the body keeps step with the spirit ; and actuality fore-stalls, in a way, the selection by memory ; significance, pleasantness, choice, not brute outer circumstance, determining the accentuation, the phrasing (in musical sense) of our life. For life must be *phrased*, lest it become mere jabber, without pleasure or lesson. Indeed, one may say that if games teach a man to stand a reverse or snatch an opportunity, so bicycling might afford an instructive analogy of what things to notice, to talk about and remember on life's high-roads and lanes ; and what others, whizzing past on scarce skimming wheel, to reject from memory and feeling.

My Bicycle and I

The bicycle, in this particular, like the imagination it so well symbolizes, is a great liberator, freeing us from dwelling among ugliness and rubbish. It gives a foretaste of freedom of the spirit, reducing mankind to the only real and final inequality: inequality in the power of appreciating and enjoying. The poor clerk, or schoolmistress, or obscure individual from Grub Street can, with its help, get as much variety and pleasure out of a hundred miles' circuit as more fortunate persons from unlimited globe-trotting. Nay, the fortunate person can on a bicycle get rid of the lumber and litter which constitutes so large a proportion of the gifts of Fortune. For the things *one has to have*, let alone the things *one has to do* (in deference to butler and lady's-maid, high priests of fitness), are as well left behind, if only occasionally. And among such doubtful gifts of fortune is surely the thought of the many people employed in helping one to do nothing whatever. It spoils the Campagna, for instance, to have a brougham, with coachman and footman, and grooms to lead back the horses, all kicking their heels at the bridge of the Anio: worthy persons, no doubt, and conscientiously subserving our higher

Hortus Vitae

existence ; but the bare fact of whom, their well-appointed silhouettes, seem somehow incongruous as we get further and more solitary among the pale grass billows, deeper into that immense space, that unlimited horizon of ages.

These are some of the prestigious merits of the bicycle, though many more might be added. This grotesque iron courser, not without some of the grasshopper's absurd weirdness, is a creature of infinite capacities for the best kind of romance—the romance of the fancy. It may turn out to be (I always suspect it) the very mysterious steed which carried adventurous knights and damsels through forests of delightful enchantments, sprouting wings, proving a hippogriff and flying up, whenever fairies were lacking or whenever envious wizards were fussing about. And, as reward—or perhaps crown—for its many good services, reposed occasionally by Britomart's or Amadis' side, far from the world's din, even as my bicycle rested on the pale wintry grass hillocks, under the rolling cloud bales and the song of invisible larks, of the Campagna.

PUZZLES OF THE PAST

PUZZLES OF THE PAST

I AM full of curiosity about the Past. This does not mean that I read the memoirs of Napoleon's marshals, or that I write queries to antiquarian papers, or that I enjoy being taken to see invisible Pictish barrows and Roman encampments ; in fact, nothing could be further from my character and habits. But the Past puzzles me ; and I like being puzzled by the Past.

Not in its details, but in all manner of general questions, and such, moreover, as very rarely admit of an answer. What are the relations of the Past and Present ? Where does the past begin ? And, to go further still, what *is* the Past ?

All this sounds abstract, and even metaphysical ; but it is really quite the reverse. These speculations are always connected with some concrete place or person, and they arise

Hortus Vitae

in my mind (and in the mind of the twenty thousand persons whom I don't know, but whom I resemble), together with some perspective of street or outline of face, and always with a faint puff of emotion. I will give you a typical instance of one of these puzzles. It formulated itself in my mind a few weeks ago at Verona, while going to see a certain little church on the slopes above the Adige. You go through the priest's house and vineyard ; there is a fine carved lintel and a bit of fresco, all in the midst of a rag fair of squalid streets. What a place this must once have been ! I felt the charm and splendour of piled-up palace and hanging gardens in former days. In former days ! And a little doubt dropped into it, "If former days there ever were." For who can tell ? This crumbling, ragged business which to us means that we stand before the Past ; this gradual perishing of things in neglect and defilement, may very well have formed a necessary part of our ancestors' present. Our own standard and habit of tidiness, decorum, and uniformity may be quite recent developments ; barbarism, in the sense of decay and pollution, may have existed together with

Puzzles of the Past

prosperity. It is quite possible that dead donkeys were left in the streets of Haroun-al-Raschid's Bagdad, or Semiramis' Babylon, as well as in those of poor little modern Tangier. And the Verona of the Scaligers may have been just such a Verona as this which delights and depresses us, only with new beautiful things being built quite naturally alongside of decayed and defiled ones ; things nowadays all equally levelled in ruin and squalor. The splendour of the Past may be a mere fiction of our own, like the romance of the Past which we say we no longer believe in. But history gives us, I think, no definite answer.

With this question another is closely connected. I must explain it by a simile. A foreign friend of mine insists, with some show of reason, that much as any two countries of the Continent may differ, England contrives to differ a great deal more from all of them than they can differ from each other. Well, it sometimes strikes me that, in a similar way, our Present may be wholly detached from the mass, however heterogeneous, of the Past ; an island divided from the mainland of history by seas of difference, or rather, like the great

Hortus Vitae

Arctic countries, a separate Continent, shrouded in mystery, of which we know only that its hitherto explored shores face, without ever touching, the other mapped-out Continent we call the Past. For just think, let us say, of the change implied in the multiplication through machinery of a stereotyped form, as against the production of an individual object by individual hands. Why, such a change means democracy far more than any other change in laws and franchises ; and it means, among other things, that any art sprung really from the present will have to be of the nature, not of the painting or sculpture of old days, of the architecture which made each single cathedral an individual organism, but of the nature rather of process engraving, of lithography (are not our posters, Chéret's, for instance, the only thing which our masses see, as their distant forbears saw frescoes in churches and *campo santos* ?), of book printing, in short ; and will not literature and music become more and more the typical kinds of art, the creation of one brain projected over millions of acres and through mere wires and cylinders ? And think also of the difference in locomotion. Say what

Puzzles of the Past

you will, people who rode in coaches were bound to be more like people who rode in litters, for all the difference between Rome under Cæsar and England under George III., than like people who go by train. That is all on the surface, serious persons will answer : the pace at which people's body and goods are conveyed along may alter without their thoughts or feelings being changed the least bit. Perhaps. But are we so absolutely sure of that ?

For instance, are we sure we should have been able to get on for half an hour together with even our own great-grandparents of little more than a hundred years ago ? There they hang, our great-grandfathers and mothers and uncles and aunts (or some one's else, more likely), painted by Reynolds or Raeburn, delightful persons whose ghosts we would give anything to meet. Their ghosts ; aye, there's the rub. For their ghosts would have altered with posthumous experience, would have had glimpses of the world we live in, and somewhat conformed to its habits ; but could we really get on with the living men and women of former days ? It is true that we understand and enjoy the books which they read, or rather

Hortus Vitae

a small number of pages out of a smaller number of books. But did they read them in the same way? I should not wonder if the different sense in which we took their favourite authors, or rather the different sense in which we discovered that they were in the habit of taking them, created considerable coolness, not to say irritation, between the ghosts of the readers of "The Vicar of Wakefield," or "Werther," or the "*Nouvelle Héloïse*" and ourselves. Besides, they would be monstrously shocked at our ways. They would think us marvellously ill-bred. While we! I dare scarcely harbour the thought, much less express it. Anyway, it is certain that they occasionally allowed Sheridan and Miss Burney (I am not even thinking of the remote people of Fielding), and even, alas! Miss Austen, to paint pictures of them which we would scarcely own up to from novelists and playwrights of our day, and therefore I return to my puzzle: is time an unbroken continuity, all its subdivisions merely conventional, like those of postal districts; or, as I suggested above, are there real chains of mountains, chasms, nay, deep oceans, breaking up its surface; and do we not belong, we people of

Puzzles of the Past

the nineteenth century, rather to the future which we are forming than to the Past which, much to its astonishment (I should think), produced us ?

There are other puzzles about the Past, far more intimate in nature and less grandiose, but, on the whole, far less easy to answer. One of these is difficult even to word, but every reader will identify it in connection with some of the most delightful experiences he has been admitted to. Roughly, it may be expressed as follows :—Were old people ever young ? Was there a period in the world's history (and not so far back) when everybody was enchantingly mixed of primness and romance, had little graces of manner, nods and becks and wreathed smiles, with a tendency every now and then to employ language rather stronger than the occasion warranted ? Did youths and maidens wander about with faint moral odours of pot-pourri and quaint creases of character, as of superannuated garments long folded in a drawer ! Or are these qualities taken on by each generation in turn, in which case will the Hilda Wangels and Dodos of to-day delight the twentieth century as possible inmates of Cranford ?

Hortus Vitae

Having worked my way to so marvellous a puzzle as this, I had better remove the strain by hastily suggesting another question, which will satisfactorily get rid of the others, to wit, whether the Past did really ever exist ?

On the whole, I am tempted to believe that it did not. I can even prove it by a logical stroke worthy of the very greatest philosophers. Granted that the Past is that which no longer has any existence, only the Present could ever be real now ; as the Present and the Past cannot co-exist, the Past evidently never existed at all ; unless, indeed, we call in the aid of the Hegelian philosophy, and set our minds at ease by a fine reduction of contraries, to the effect that since the Present and the Past exclude one another, they evidently must really be the same thing at bottom.

This is cogent. And yet a doubt continues lurking in my mind. Is not what we think of as the Past—what we discuss, describe, and so often passionately love—a mere creation of our own ? Not merely in its details, but in what is far more important, in its essential, emotional, and imaginative quality and value ? Perhaps some day psychology may discover that we

Puzzles of the Past

have a craving, like that which produces music or architecture, for a special state of nerves (or of something else, if people are bored with nerves by that time), obtainable by a special human product called the Past—the Past which has never been the Present.

MAKING PRESENTS

MAKING PRESENTS

IT was the dreadful perplexity of making a present to a rich woman. Like Heine's sweetheart, she was abundantly provided with diamonds and pearls and all things which mankind can wish. And so the lack of any mortal thing suggested that, so far from liking to be given it, she would far rather not have it at all.

I do not choose to state whether that lady ever did get a present from me, for the statement would be an anti-climax. Suffice it that as a result of profound meditation I found myself in possession of a "Philosophy of Presents," which, copied fair on imaginary vellum, or bound in ideal morocco, I now lay at the feet of my friends, as a very appropriate gift, and entirely home-made.

The whole subject of presents is bristling with fallacies, which have arisen like thistles

Hortus Vitae

out of the thinness of our life and the stoniness of our hearts. One of these mistaken views is perpetually being put forward by people who assert that *the pleasantness of a gift lies in the good-will of the giver.* The notion has a specious air of amiability and disinterestedness and general good-breeding ; but the only truth it really contains is that, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, a present gives exactly no pleasure at all. For, if the pleasantness of a present depended solely on the expression of good-will, why not express good-will in any of the hundred excellent modes of doing so ?—for we have all of us, more or less, voice, expressive features, words ready or (more expressive still) unready, and occasions enough, Heaven knows ! of making small sacrifices for our neighbours. And it is entirely superfluous to waste our substance and cumber our friends' houses by adding to these convenient items, material tokens like, say, gold from Ophir and apes and peacocks. There are inconveniences attached to the private possession of bullion ; many persons dislike the voices of peacocks, and I, at all events, am perfectly harrowed by the physiognomy of apes.

This, of course, is metaphorical ; but it leads

Making Presents

me from the mere exposition of theory to the argument from experience. If presents are pleasant because of the good-will, etc., why are we all brought up (oh, the cruelty of suppressed disappointment when the doll arrives instead of the wooden horse, or the duplicate kitchen-set instead of the longed-for box of bricks !) to pretend that the gift we receive is the very thing we have been pining for for years ? And here I would ask my friend and reader, the often-much-perplexed-giver-and-receiver of gifts, whether, quite apart even from those dreadful smothered tragedies of one's childhood, there are, among the trifling false positions of life, many false positions more painful than that of choosing a gift which one knows is not wanted, unless it be the more painful position still of receiving a gift which one would tip any one to take away ?

Some persons feel this so strongly, wondering why the preacher forgot this item in his list of vanities, that you may hear them loudly vowing that never again will they be caught in the act of making a present. . . .

So far about the mistaken view of the subject ; now for the right one, which is mine : the result

Hortus Vitae

of great experience and of infinite meditation, all coming to a head in that recent perplexed business of choosing a present for the lady with the diamonds and pearls. And before proceeding further, let me say that my experience is really exceptional. Not that I have given many gifts, or that I am in the least certain that the few I have given were not the usual Dead Sea apples ; but because I have been, what is much more to the point, a great receiver of presents, my room, my house containing nothing beautiful or pleasant that is not a present from some dear friend, or (the paradox will be explained later on) a present from myself. A great receiver of presents, also, because presents give me a very lively and special pleasure ; have done so always ever since my days of Christmas-trees and birthday candles, leaving all through my life a particular permeating charm connected with certain dates and seasons, like the good, wonderful smell of old fir-needles slightly toasted, and of wax tapers recently extinguished, so that all very delightful places and moments are apt to affect me as a sort of gift-giving, what the Germans have a dear word for, beloved of children, *Bescheerung*. For if life, wisely lived, ought

Making Presents

to be, as I firmly believe, nothing but a long act of courtship, then, surely, its exquisite things—summer nights with loose-hanging stars, pale sunny winter noons, first strolls through towered towns or upon herb-scented hills, the hearing again of music one has understood, not to speak of the gesture and voice of the people whom one holds dear—all these, and all other exquisite movements or exquisite items of life, should be felt with the added indescribable pleasure of being gifts.

A present, then, may be defined as a *thing which one wants given by a person whom one likes*. But our English syntax falls short of my meaning, for what I would wish to say is rather, in Teutonic fashion, “*a by a person one likes to one given object one wants*.” The stress of the sentence should be laid on the word *wants*. For much of the charm, and most of the dignity, of a gift depends on its being *a thing one would otherwise have done without*.

This is true even with those dreadful useful objects which make us feel hot to distribute; they have become melancholy possible presents because, alas! however necessary, they would

Hortus Vitae

otherwise not have been forthcoming. And, apart from such cases, mankind has always decided that gifts should not be of the nature of blankets, or manuals of science, or cooking-pots, but rather flowers, fruit, books of poetry, and the wares of silken Samarkand and cedarèd Lebanon. It is admitted upon all hands that, to be perfect, presents must be superfluities ; but I should like to add that the reverse also holds good, and that superfluities would be the better, nine times out of ten, for being presents.

'Tis, methinks, a sign of the recent importation and comparative scarcity of honest livelihoods, that we should think so much how we come by our money, and so little how we part with it, as if we were free to waste, provided we do not steal. Now, *my manuals of political economy* (which were, of course, *not* presents to me) make it quite plain that whatever we spend in mere self-indulgence is so much taken away from the profitable capital of the community ; and sundry other sciences, which require no manuals to teach them, make it plainer still that the habit of indulging, upon legal payment, our whims and our greedinesses, fills our houses with lumber and our souls with worse than

Making Presents

lumber where there might be light and breathable air. Extremes meet: and even as to paupers, the barest necessities of life are superfluities—things dispensed with ; so, at the other end of the vicious circle, to the spendthrift luxury ceases to be luxury, and superfluities are turned into things one cannot do without.

The charm of a gift, its little moral flavour which makes us feel the better for it, resides, therefore, not merely in good-will, but in the little prelude of self-restraint on the one hand, of unselfishness on the other. Unless you gave it me, I should not have that pleasant thing ; and you, knowing this much, give it to me, instead of to yourself. What a complicated lovers'-knot of good-feeling there is tied, as round flowers or sweetmeats, round every genuine present ! This is a rich, varied impression, full of harmonies ; compare with it the dry, dull, stifling impression one gets from looking round a rich man's house, or admiring the ornaments of a rich woman's person : all these things having merely been bought !

Yet buying can be a fine thing. And among

Hortus Vitae

genuine presents (and in an honourable place) I certainly include—as I hinted some way back—the presents which people *sometimes make to themselves*. For 'tis a genuine present when a person who never allows himself a superfluity, at last buys one, as Charles and Mary Lamb did their first blue pots and prints, out of slowly saved up pennies. There is in that all the grace of long self-restraint, and the grace of finally triumphant love—love for that faithfully courted object, that Rachel among inanimates ! The giving to one's self of such a present is a fit occasion for rejoicing ; and 'tis a proper instinct (more proper than the one of displaying wedding presents) which causes the united giver and receiver of the gift to summon the neighbours, to see it and rejoice, not without feasting.

But presents of this sort are even more difficult to compass than the other sort where people, like the lady sung by Heine, have pearls and diamonds in plenty, and all things which mankind can wish.

GOING AWAY

GOING AWAY

WE stood on the steps of the old Scotch house as the carriage rolled her away. A last greeting from that delightful, unflagging voice ; the misty flare of the lanterns round a corner ; and then nothing but the darkness of the damp autumn night. There is to some foolish persons—myself especially—a strange and almost supernatural quality about the fact of departure, one's own or that of others, which constant repetition seems, if anything, merely to strengthen. I cannot become familiar with the fact that a moment, the time necessary for a carriage, as in this case, to turn a corner, or for those two steel muscles of the engine to play upon each other, can do so complete and wonderful a thing as to break the continuity of intercourse, to remove a living presence. The substitution of an image for a reality, the present broken off short and replaced by the past ;

Hortus Vitae

enumerating this by no means gives the equivalent of that odd and unnatural word GONE. And the terror of death itself lies surely in its being the most sudden and utter act of *going away*.

I suppose there must be people who do not feel like this, as there are people also who do not feel, apparently, the mystery of change of place, of watching the familiar lines of hill or valley transform themselves, and the very sense of one's bearings, what was in front or to the other side, east or west, getting lost or hopelessly altered. Such people's lives must be (save for misfortune) funnily undramatic ; and, trying to realize them, I understand why such enormous crowds require to go and see plays.

It is usually said that in such partings as these—partings with definite hope of meeting and with nothing humanly tragic about them, so that the last interchange of voice is expected to be a laugh or a joke—the sadder part is for those who stay. But I think this is mistaken. There is indeed a little sense of flatness—almost of something in one's chest—when the train is gone or the carriage rolled off ; and one goes back into one's house or into the just-left room, throwing a glance all round as if to

Going Away

measure the emptiness. But the accustomed details—the book we left open, the order we had to give, the answer brought to the message, and breakfast and lunch and dinner and the postman, all the great eternities—gather round and close up the gap : close the gone one, and that piece of past, not merely *up*, but, alas ! *out*.

It is the sense of this, secret even in the most fatuous breast, which makes things sadder for the goer. He knows from experience, and, if he have imagination, he feels, this process of closing him out, this rapid adaptation to doing without him. And meanwhile he, in his carriage or train, is being hurled into the void ; for even the richest man and he of the most numerous clients, is turned adrift without possessions or friends, a mere poor nameless orphan, when on a solitary journey. There is, moreover, a sadder feeling than this in the heart of the more sentimental traveller, who has engaged the hospitality of friends. *He knows it is extended equally to others* ; that this room, which he may have made peculiarly his own, filling it, perhaps, in proportion to the briefness of sojourn, with his own most

Hortus Vitae

personal experience ; the landscape made his own through this window, the crucial conversation, receiving unexpected sympathies, held or (more potent still) thought over afterwards in that chair ; he knows that this room will become, perhaps, O horror, within a few hours, another's !

The extraordinary hospitality of England, becoming, like all English things, rather too well done materially, rather systematic, and therefore heartless, inflicts, I have been told, some painful blows on sentimental aliens, particularly of Latin origin. There is a pang in finding on the hospitable door a label-holder with one's name in it : it saves losing one's way, but suggests that one is apt to lose it, is a stranger in the house ; and it tells of other strangers, past and future, each with his name slipped in. Similarly the guest-book, imitated from nefarious foreign inns, so fearfully suggestive of human instability, with its close-packed signatures, and dates of arrival and departure. And then the cruelty of housekeepers, and the ruthlessness of housemaids ! Take heed, O Thestylis, dear Latin guardian of my hearth, take heed and imprint my urgent wishes in thy

Going Away

faithful heart : never, never, never, in my small southern home (not unlike, I sometimes fondly fancy, the Poet's *parva domus*), never let me surprise thee depositing thy freshly-whitened linen in heaps outside the door of the departing guest ; and never, I conjure thee, offend his eye or nostril with mops, or *frotteur's* rollers, or resinous scent of furniture-polish near his small chamber ! For that chamber, kindly Handmaiden, is *his*. He is the Prophet it was made for ; and the only Prophet conceivable as long as present. And when he takes departure, why, the void must follow, a long hiatus, darkness, and stacked-up furniture, and the scent of varnish within tight-closed shutters. . . .

But, alas ! alas ! not all kind Thestyli's doing and refraining is able to dispel the natural sense of coming and going : one's bed re-made, one's self replaced, new boxes brought and unpacked, metaphorically as well as literally ; fresh adjustments, new subjects of discourse, new sympathies : and the poor previous occupant meanwhile *rolling*, as the French put it. Rolling ! how well the word expresses that sense of smooth and empty

Hortus Vitae

nowhere, with nothing to catch on or keep, which plays so large a part in all our earthly experience ; as, for the rest, is natural, seeing that the earth is only a ball, at least the astronomers say so.

But let us turn from this painful side of *going away* ; and insist rather on certain charming impressions sometimes connected with it. For there is something charming and almost romantic, when, as in the case I mentioned, the friend leaves friends late in the evening. There is the whole pleasant day intact, with leisurely afternoon stroll when all is packed and ready : watching the sunset up the estuary, picking some flowers in the garden ; sometimes even seeing the first stars prick themselves upon the sky, and mild sheet-lightnings, auguring good, play round the house, disclosing distant hills and villages. And the orderly dinner, seeming more swept and garnished for the anticipation of bustle, the light on the cloth, the sheen on the silver, the grace and fragrance of fruit and flowers, and the gracious faces above it, remains a wide and steady luminous vision on the black background of midnight travel, of the train rushing

Going Away

through nothingness. Most charming of all, when after the early evening on the balcony, the traveller leaves the south, to hurtle by night, conscious only of the last impression of supper with kind friends at Milan or the lakes, and the glimpse, in the station light, of heads covered with veils, and flowers in the hands, and southern evening dresses. These are the occasional gracious compensations for that bad thing called going away.

COMING BACK

COMING BACK

MOST people tell you that to return to places where one has been exceptionally happy is an unwise proceeding. But this, I venture to conceive, is what poor Alfred de Musset called “une insulte au bonheur.” It shows, at all events, a lack of appreciation of the particular nature, permanent, and, in a manner, radiating, of happy experiences. Of course, I am not speaking of the cases where the happy past has been severed from indifferent present and future by some dreadful calamity ; poetry alone is consolatory and also aloof enough to deal decorously with such tragic things, and they are no concern of the essayist. There is, besides, a very individual and variable character about great misfortunes, no two natures being affected by them quite alike, so that discussion and generalization are not merely intrusive, but also mostly fruitless. Therefore the

Hortus Vitae

question is not whether people are wise or unwise in avoiding places where they have been happy, after events which have shattered their happiness. And the only loss I have to deal with is the loss—if it really is one, as we shall examine—of the actual circumstances which accompanied a happy experience; the loss of the *then* as opposed to the *now*, and, in a measure of the irrecoverable time, years or months, and of the small luggage of expectations and illusions which has got inevitably mislaid or scattered in the interval. And the question arises whether 'tis wiser, in a sense whether it is more delicately epicurean, to avoid the places which bring all that, together with the sense of the happy gone-by days, vividly home to one; or whether, as I contend, past happiness ought not to be used as an essential element in the happiness of the present.

I have had, lately, the experience of returning to a part of the world which I had not seen for many, many years, and where I had spent the drowsy long days of a long illness, and the dreamy sweet days of a longer convalescence. It made a day's journey, without

Coming Back

any especial resting-place for the soles of my feet, and undertaken, I can scarcely tell why, with a little shyness and fear. I did not go to the house where I had lived, but to one in the neighbourhood, whither I had often been taken all those years ago ; and I did not even take the precaution—or perhaps took the contrary one—of securing the presence of the owners. The ladies were out ; gone to one of the little fishing towns which are strung all around the Forth, and they would not be back till teatime. But the benevolent Scottish housemaid, noticing perhaps a shadow of disappointment, suggested my going in and waiting.

The little old castle, which had got a little blurred in my recollection, seemed suddenly remembered and familiar, even as had been the case with the country I had driven along from the station ; the undulating turnip-fields and fields of pale stooked corn, the reaping-machines and the women tying up the bean-straw, the white line of the Forth, and the whole pale, delicate country under the low, tender, *intimate* northern sky. Even the smell, sweet and pungent, of the withered potatoes,

Hortus Vitae

bringing the sense of knowing it all, turnings of roads and of the land, so well. And similarly inside the castle, where I lingered on the pretext of writing a note to those ladies. It was all unchanged ; the escutcheons in relief on the ceiling, the view of cornfield and thin beech belts, and distant sea from the windows, the lavender and *pot-pourri* in the bowls, and almost the titles of the books, seemed quietly, at the touch of reality, to open out in remembrance. I did not stay till the return of the ladies, but went back to the station, and waited on the bridge for my train, which was a good half-hour late. I looked down from that bridge on the kind and gentle country in the veiled sunshine. The hill to the back of the house where I had lived, in the distance, the red roofs of the fishing villages, the little spire of the smallest of them barely projecting, as it always did, above the freshly reaped fields. And I felt, as I leaned against the parapet watching for my train's smoke coming towards me, not the loss, but rather the inestimable gain which a kindly past represents. Years gone by ? Nay, rather years which make endurable, which furnish and warm the present,

Coming Back

giving it sweetness and significance. How very poor we must be in our early youth, with no possessions like these ; and how rich in our later life, with many years distilled into the essence of a single to-day !

As I stood on the railway bridge thinking or feeling in this manner, I heard wheels, and saw a pony-cart, with an elderly lady, and a younger one driving her, coming towards me. It was the ladies who had been so kind to me all those years back, returning to the little castle. I turned my back, leaned on the parapet, and let them pass me, unnoticed. I wanted to keep them also in that dim and dear kind past.

For we must be discreet as well as grateful-hearted if we would enjoy the Past's full gifts. . . .

The Past's gifts ; and to these I would add, or among them rather I would include, an item which I find a difficulty in naming properly, and which, of course, I hesitate a little to speak about. I mean the gifts, odd as it sounds, of Death. For Death, while in his main function the cruel taker-away, the violent or stealthy robber, has also a less important side

Hortus Vitae

to his character, and is a giver of gifts, if only we know how to receive them. And he is this even apart from his power (for which one might imagine that the Greeks gave him, in certain terra cottas and reliefs, so very gentle and beautiful an aspect) of bringing light and loving-kindness into poor human creatures' judgments, and teaching them to understand and pardon; apart also from that mystic relationship, felt by Dante and all the poets, which he bears to the genius of imaginative love. What I allude to is a more humble, but quite as gracious function, of leading those he takes away (with the infinitely tender gesture of the antique funereal Hermes), not into vacuity and the horrid blackness of oblivion, but into a place of safe and serene memory. In this capacity Death can be, even like his master, Time, a giver of gifts to us. For those *are* gifts to us, those friends he gathers together under hazier, tenderer skies into our thoughts which have the autumn warmth and stillness of late-reaped fields. Nay, the gift is greater, for there are added certain half-strangers, towards whom we lose all shyness, and who turn to real friends when

Coming Back

introduced by death and worked into our past ; dear such-an-one, whom we scarcely knew, barely more than face and name *then*, but know and have the right to care for now. So that I think that we might extract and take with happy interpretation those two last lines of the old, old Goethe's heartbreaking dedication to the generations whom he had outlived :—

“ Was ich besitze, seh' ich wie im Weiten,
Und was verschwand, wird mir zu Wirklichkeiten.”

For all which reasons let us never be afraid of going back to places where we have been exceptionally happy ; not even in the cases where we recognize that such former happiness was due, in part, to some dispelled illusion. For if we can but learn to be glad of the Past and receive its gift with gratitude, may not the remembrance of a dear illusion, brought home with the sight of the places which we filled with it, be merely another blessing ; a possession which nothing can rob us of, and by which our spirit is the richer ?

LOSING ONE'S TRAIN

LOSING ONE'S TRAIN

THE clocks up at the villa must have been all wrong, or else my watch did not go with them, or else I had not looked often enough at it while rambling about the town on my way to the station. Certain it is that when I got there, at the gallop of my cab-horse, the express was gone. There is something hatefully inexorable about expresses : it is useless to run after them, even in Italy. The next train took an hour and a quarter instead of forty minutes to cover the nineteen miles between Pistoia and Florence. Moreover, that next train was not till eight in the evening, and it was now half-past five.

I felt all it was proper to feel on the occasion, and said, if anything, rather more. Missing a train is a terrible business, even if you miss nothing else in consequence ; and the inner disarray, the blow and wrench to thoughts

Hortus Vitae

and feelings, is most often far worse than any mere upsetting of arrangements. A chasm suddenly gapes between present and future, and the river of life flows backwards, if but for a second. It is most fit and natural to lose one's temper ; but the throwing out of so much moral ballast does not help one to overtake that train. I mention this, lest I should pass for heartless ; and now proceed to say that, after a few minutes given to wrath and lamentation, I called the cab back and went in search of a certain very ancient church, containing a very ancient pulpit, which I had never succeeded in seeing before. Exactly as on previous occasions, when I got to the farm where the key of that church was kept, the key had gone to town in the pocket of the peasant. He would be back, no doubt, at nightfall. But I had not very much expected the church to be open, so I felt perfectly indifferent at not seeing the pulpit—nay, if anything, a little relieved, as one does sometimes when friends prove *not at home*.

I walked up a long steep track to the little battered, black, fast-locked church, which stands all alone under some oak trees. The

Losing One's Train

track was through thin hillside woods. Such divine woods ! young oak and acacia, and an undergrowth of grass and ferns, of full-blown roses thrown across the grass ; and here and there, dark in that pale young green, a cypress. The freshness of evening came all of a sudden, and with it a scent of every kind of leaf and herb and fern, and the sweetness of the ripening corn all round. And when I got to the ridge, slippery with dry cut grass, what should I see in front of me, over the olive-yards and the wooded slopes, but the walls and towers of Serravalle, which have beckoned to my fancy almost ever since my childhood. I sat there a long while in the June sunset and very nearly missed the second train, which it had seemed intolerable to wait for.

This is an allegory, and I commend its application to the wise and gentle reader. There are more of such symbolical trains lost than real ones, even by the most travelled mortals, Odysseus or a bag-man. And such losing of trains is not inevitably a blessing. I have often written about life with optimistic heartlessness, because life, on the whole, has been uncommonly kind to me, and because

Hortus Vitae

one is nearer the truth when cheerful than when depressed. But this is the place for a brief interlude of pessimism. For it is all very well to make the best of losing trains when we have time, cabs, and a fine view at hand ; and when in losing the train we lose nothing else, except our temper. But surely 'tis no ingratitude towards life's great mercies and blessings to discriminate them from life's buffets and bruisings. And methinks that the teaching of courage or resignation might fitly begin by the recognition of the many cases where only courage or resignation avails, because they are thoroughly bad. There is something stupid and underbred at times in the attitude of saints and stoics—at least in their books. When Rachel weepeth for her children, we have no business to come round hawking our consolation ; we should stand aside, unless we can cradle her to sleep in our arms. And if we refuse to weep, 'tis not because there is not matter enough for weeping, but because we require our strength and serenity to carry her through her trouble. Pain, dear cheerful friends, is pain ; and grief, grief ; and if our own complete human efficiency requires the acquaintance

Losing One's Train

thereof, 'tis because the knowledge of their violence and of their wiles is needed for our own protection and the helping of other folk. Evil comes from the gods, no doubt ; but so do all things ; and to extract good from it—the great Prometheus-feat of man—is not to evil's credit, but to the credit of good. The contrary doctrine is a poison to the spirit, though a poison of medicinal use in moments of anguish, a bromide or an opiate.

I am speaking, therefore, only of such contingencies as will bear comparison, without silly stoicism, to the missing of a train. Much of the good such disappointments may contain is of the nature of education, and most of it a matter of mere novelty. Without suspecting it, we are all suffering from lack of new departures ; and life would no doubt be better if we tried a few more things, and gave the hidden, neglected possibilities a greater chance. Change as such is often fruitful of improvement, exposing to renovating air and rains the hard, exhausted soil of our souls, turning up new layers and helping on life's chemistry. The thwarting of our cherished plans is beneficial, because our plans are often mere routine, born not of

Hortus Vitae

wisdom, but of inertness. In our endless treadmill of activity, in our ceaseless rumination, we are, as a fact, neither acting nor thinking ; and life, secretly at a standstill, ceases to produce any good. There was no reason for taking that express and getting back two or three hours sooner to my house : no one required me, nothing needed doing. Yet, unless I had lost that train I should not have dreamed of taking that walk, of making that little journey of discovery, in a delightful unknown place.

There is another source of good hidden in disappointment. For it is disappointment rather than age (age getting the credit for what it merely witnesses) which teaches us to work into life's scheme certain facts, frequently difficult of acceptance ; trying to make them, as all reality should be, causes of strength rather than of weakness. Painful facts ? Or rather, perhaps, only painful contradictions to certain pleasant delusions, founded on nothing save their pleasantness, and taken for granted—who knows how long ?—without proof and without questioning. Facts concerning not merely success, love, personal contact, but also one's own powers and possibilities for good, what

Losing One's Train

the world is able to receive at one's hands, as much as of what the world can give to one.

But the knowledge which disappointment gives, to those wishing to learn from it, has a higher usefulness than practical application. It constitutes a view of life, a certain contemplative attitude which, in its active resignation, in its domination of reality by intelligent acquiescence, gives continuity, peace, and dignity. And here my allegory finds its completion. For what compensated me after my lost train and all my worry and vexation of spirit? Nothing to put in my pocket or swell my luggage, not even a kingdom, such as made up for the loss of poor Saul's asses; but an impression of sunset freshness and sweetness among ripening corn and delicate leaves, and a view, unexpected, solemn, and charming, with those long-forgotten distant walls and towers which I shall never reach, and which have beckoned to me from my childhood.

Such is the allegory, or morality, of the Lost Train.

THE HANGING GARDENS

THE HANGING GARDENS

VALEDICTORY

I AM not alluding to those of Semiramis. Though, now I come to think of it, this is the moment for protesting against one of those unnecessary deceptions from which the candid mind of children is allowed to suffer. For the verb *to hang* invariably implies that the hanging object (or, according to our jurisprudence, person) is supported by a rope, nail, or other device, from above, while remaining unsupported from below. And it was in such relations to the forces of gravitation that my infancy conceived those gardens of the Babylonish Queen. So that I quite remember my bitter disappointment (the first germ, doubtless, of a general scepticism about Gods and Men) when a cut in an indiscreet *Handbook of Antiquities* displayed these flowery places as resting

Hortus Vitae

flatly on a housetop, and no more *hanging*, in any intelligible sense, than I hung myself.

Having lodged this complaint, I will, however, admit that this misleading adjective comes as a boon in the discourse I am now meditating. Since, returning to my old theme of the *Garden of Life*, I find that the misapplication of that word *Hanging*, and its original literal suggestion, lends added significance to this allegoric dictum : Of all the *Gardens of Life* the best worth cultivating are often the Hanging Ones. Yes ! Hanging between the town pavement, a hundred feet below, and the open sky, with gales ready to sweep down every flower-pot into smithereens, the kind or wicked sky, immediately above. Moreover, as regards legal claim to soil, leasehold, freehold, or copyhold, why, simply none, the earth having been carried up to that precarious place in arduous basketfuls.

One of the wisest of women (I say it with pride, for she is my godchild) put this skyey allegory of mine into plain words, which I often repeat to myself, and never without profit. The circumstances and character of her husband had involved her in wanderings from her very wedding-day ; and each of her six children had

The Hanging Gardens

been born in a different place, and each in a more unlikely one. "It must have been very difficult to settle down at last like this," I said, looking in admiration from the dainty white walls and white carpets to the delicately laid table, with the flowers upon it and around it—I mean the garland of pink little faces and pink little pinafores. "I wonder you could do it after so long." "But I have always been what you call *settled*," she answered, and added very simply—"As soon as I took in that we should always be eternally uprooting, I made up my mind that the only way was to live as if we should never move at all. You see, everything would have gone to bits if I had let myself realise the contrary, and I think I should have gone crazy into the bargain."

There has been a good deal of *going to bits* and of craziness of sorts owing to the centuries and the universe not always having been as wise as this lady. And—with all deference to higher illuminations—I am tempted to ask myself whether all creeds, which have insisted on life's fleetingness and vanity, have not played considerable havoc with the fruitfulness, let alone the pleasantness, of existence. Certainly

Hortus Vitae

the holy persons who awaited the end of the world in caves, and on platforms fastened to columns, had not well-furbished knives and forks, nor carefully folded linen, nor, as a rule, nicely behaved nice little boys and girls, waiting with eager patience for a second helping of pudding. There is a distressing sneer at soap ("scented soap" it is always called), even in the great Tolstoi's writings, ever since he has allowed himself to be hag-ridden by the thought of death. And one speculates whether the care true saints have bestowed upon their souls, if not their bodies, the swept and garnished character of the best monasticism, has not been due to the fact that all this tidiness was in preparation for an eternity of beatitude?

Fortunately for the world, the case of my dear goddaughter is an extreme one; and although our existence is quite as full of uprootings as hers, they come in such a stealthy or such a tragic manner as to beget no expectation of recurrence. Moreover, the very essence of life is to make us believe in itself; we fashion the future out of our feelings of the present, and go on living as if we should live for ever, simply because, by the nature of things, we have no

The Hanging Gardens

experience of ceasing to live. Life is for ever murmuring to us the secret of its unendingness ; and it is to our honour, and for our happiness, that we, poor flashes of a second, identify ourselves with the great unceasing, steady light which we and millions of myriads besides go to make up. Are we much surer of being alive to-morrow than of being dead in fifty years ? “Is there any moment which can certify to its successor ?” That is the answer to La Fontaine’s octogenarian, planting his trees, despite the gibes of the little beardless boys whom, as is inevitable in such cases, he survived.

Défendez-vous au sage
De se donner des soins pour le plaisir d’autrui ?
Cela même est un fruit qui je goûte aujourd’hui ;
J’en puis jouir demain, et quelques jours encore.

And all I would add is that, although it was very nice of the old man to enjoy his planting because of the unborn generations who would eat the fruits, he might have been less nice and quite as pleased if, as is probable, he liked gardening for its own sake.

But people seem—on account of that horrid philosophical and moralising twist — to cast

Hortus Vitae

about for an excuse whenever they are doing what is, after all, neither wicked nor silly—to wit, making the best of such days and such powers as a merciful Providence or an indifferent trio of Fates has allowed them. But I should like to turn the tables on these persons, and suggest that all this worrying about whether life is or is not worth living, and hunting for answers for and against, may itself be an excuse, unconscious like all the most mischievous excuses, and hide not finer demands and highbred discontents, but rather a certain feebleness, lack of grip and adaptation, and an indolent acquiescence in what my god-child stoutly refused, a greater or lesser going to bits.

This much is certain, that we all of us have to make a stand against such demoralisation whenever our plans are upset, or we are impatient to do something else, or we are feeling worried and ill. We most of us have to struggle against leaving our portmanteau gaping on a sofa or throwing our boot-trees into corners when we are in a place only for a few hours; and struggle against allowing the flowers on the table to wither, and the fire to

The Hanging Gardens

go out, when we are setting out on a journey next day, or a dear one is about to say good-bye. "See to that fire being kept up, and bring fresh roses," said a certain friend of mine on a similar occasion. That was laying out a little hanging garden on the narrow ledge of two or three poor hours ; and, behold ! the garden has continued to be sweet and bright in the wide safe places of memory.

In saying all these things, I am aware that many wise men, or men reputed wise, are against me ; and that pretty hard words have been applied in the literature of all countries and ages to persons who are of my way of thinking, as, for instance, *gross*, *thoughtless*, *without soul*, and *Epicurean Swine*. And some of the people I like most to read about, the heroes of Tolstoi, André, Levine, Pierre, and, of course, Tolstoi himself, are for ever repeating that they can not live, let alone enjoy life, unless some one tell them why they should live at all.

The demand, at first sight, does not seem unreasonable, and it is hard lines that just those who will ask about such matters should be the very ones for ever denied an answer. But so it is. The secret of *why we should live*

Hortus Vitae

can be whispered only by a divinity ; and, like the divinity who spoke to the Prophet, its small, still voice is heard only in ourselves. What it says there is neither couched in a logical form nor articulated in very definite language ; and, I am bound to admit, is in no way of the nature of *pure reason*. Indeed, it is for the most part ejaculatory, and such that the veriest infant and simpleton, and I fear even animals (which is a dreadful admission), can follow its meaning. For to that unceasing question *Why?* the tiny voice within us answers with imperturbable irrelevance, "I want," "I do," "I think," and occasionally "I love." Very crass little statements, and not at all satisfactory to persons like Levine, André, and Tolstoi, who, for the most part, know them only second-hand ; but wonderfully satisfying, thank goodness, to the great majority which hears them for ever humming and beating with the sound of its own lungs and heart. And one might even suspect that they are merely a personal paraphrase of the words which the spheres are singing and the heavens are telling.

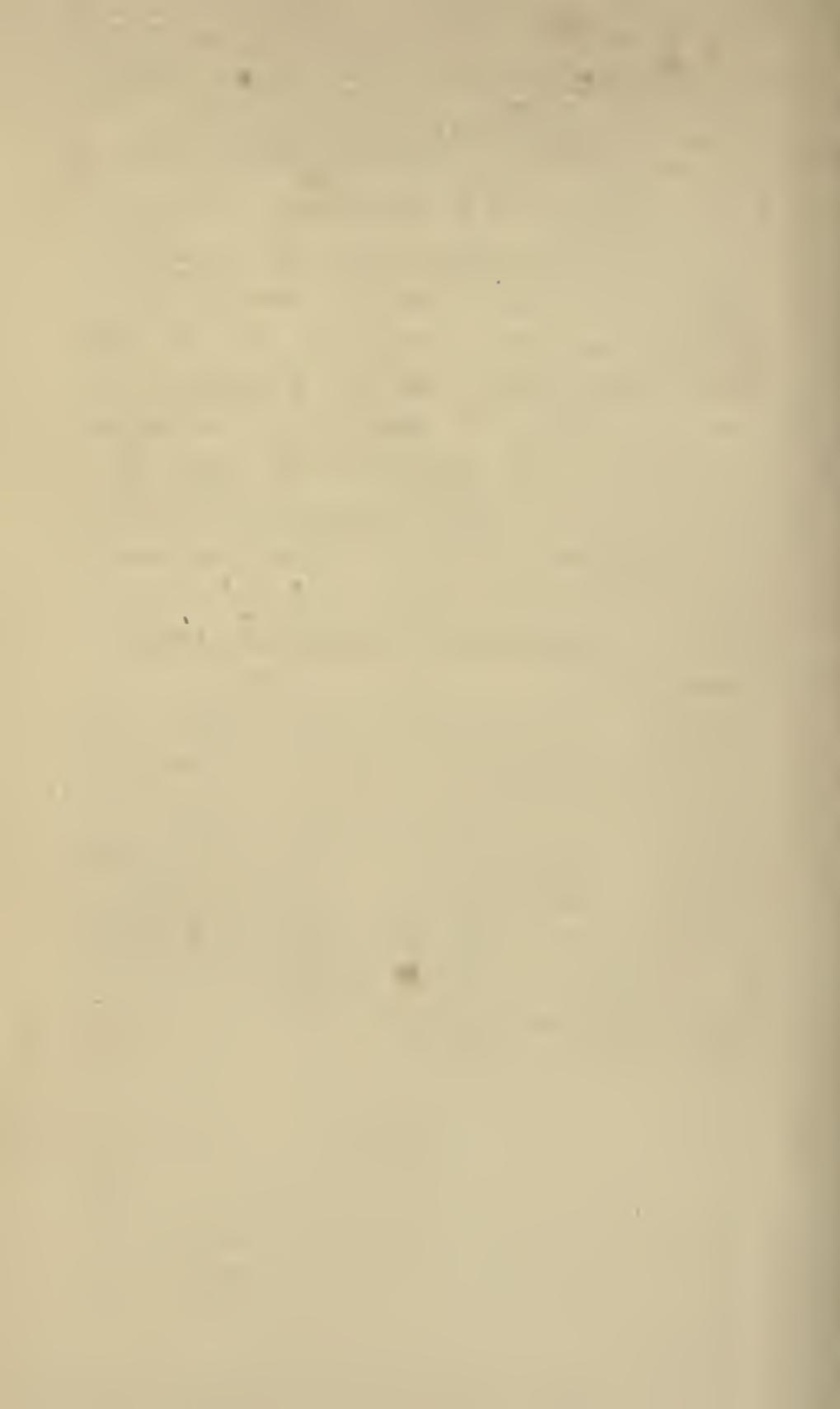
So, if we have no ampler places to cultivate with reverence and love, let us betake ourselves

The Hanging Gardens

to the hanging gardens on our roof. The suns will cake the insufficient earth and parch the delicate roots ; the storms will batter and tear the frail creepers. No doubt. But at this present moment all is fair and fragrant. And when the storms have done their wicked worst, and the sun and the frosts—nay, when that roof on which we perch is pulled to pieces, tiles and bricks, and the whole block goes—may there not be, for those caring enough, the chance of growing another garden, there or elsewhere ?

Be this as it may, one thing is certain, that no solid plot of earth between its walls or hedges allows us such intricate and unexpected bird's-eye views of streets and squares, of the bustling or resting city ; none gives us such a vault of heaven, pure and sunny, or creeping with clouds, or serenely starlit, as do these hanging gardens of our life.

THE END



HORTUS VITAE;

OR, THE HANGING GARDENS:

MORALIZING ESSAYS.

BY

VERNON LEE.

Times.—"There are many charming flowers in it . . . the swift to-and-fro of her vivid, capricious mind carries the reader hither and thither at her will, and she has such wise, suggestive things to say. . . . Whenever and wherever she speaks of Italy, the sun shines in this garden of hers, the south wind stirs among the roses."

Standard.—"There are imagination and fancy in the volume, a wise and independent outlook on society, an undercurrent of genial humour, and, what is perhaps still more rare, an invitation to think."

Westminster Gazette.—"They are of the family of Lamb, Hunt, and Hazlitt, just as those derive from the Augustans, Addison, and Steele. . . . Vernon Lee possesses the best gifts of the essayists—the engaging turn, the graceful touch, the subtle allusiveness."

Outlook.—"Vernon Lee possesses a mind richly imbued with the lore of the finest literature, and distinguished by just that touch of paradox, of the unexpected, which is the other indispensable requisite of the true essayist. Also her philosophy is never aggressively didactic, but always refreshing and helpful."

Speaker.—"This volume of essays gives us the work of Vernon Lee in her most eager and abundant mood. . . . Cordial pages that convey so much sincerity of heart, so much warmth, so much courage and love of life."

Pilot.—"All that Vernon Lee has written is strong and good . . . and her shrewd observation has enabled her to see below the surface of life."

JOHN LANE, PUBLISHER, LONDON & NEW YORK

SOME NEW POETRY

A MASQUE OF MAY MORNING. By W. GRAHAM ROBERTSON. With Twelve Full-page Illustrations in Colour by the Author. Fcap. 4to. 7s. 6d. net.

CORNISH BALLADS AND OTHER POEMS.

Being the Complete Poetical Works of ROBERT STEPHEN HAWKER, sometime Vicar of Morwenstow, Cornwall. Edited by C. E. BYLES. With numerous Illustrations by J. LEY PETHYBRIDGE and others. Crown 8vo. 5s. net.

Uniform with

FOOTPRINTS OF FORMER MEN IN FAR CORNWALL.

NEW POEMS. By RONALD CAMPBELL MACFIE, author of "Granite Dust." 5s. net.

Daily News.—"The poetry . . . is of a passionate intensity, and sings itself, with a sort of clear anger, which is new. . . . He has a curious brightness and newness of phrase, his stanzas ringing down with a note that is unfamiliar."

Academy.—"Mr. Macfie, as the reader of 'Granite Dust' well knows, is a veritable poet."

Star.—"Work . . . far above the average."

Aberdeen Free Press.—"Strong, pure, and beautiful poetry."

POEMS. By RACHEL ANNAND TAYLOR. Crown 8vo. 5s. net.

AN ELEGY TO F. W. A. DIED 1901. By VIVIAN LOCKE ELLIS. Crown 8vo. 3s. 6d. net.

LAND AND SEA PIECES: Poems. By A. E. J. LEGGE. Crown 8vo. 3s. 6d. net.

JOHN LANE, PUBLISHER, LONDON & NEW YORK

89480

UC SOUTHERN REGIONAL LIBRARY FACILITY



A 000 687 404 4

